

Your Stardust Soul by **Luddleston**

Category: Hades (Video Game 2018)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Science Fiction, Canon-Typical Violence, Canonical Character Death, M/M, Mutual Masturbation, Pining, Robot/Human Relationships, Robots, Space Pirates, Steampunk, Trans Zagreus, loosely based on Treasure Planet, they're all still gods tho

Language: English

Characters: Achilles (Hades Video Game), Artemis (Hades Video Game), Asterius | The Minotaur (Hades Video Game), Charon (Hades Video Game), Eurydice (Hades Video Game), Hermes (Hades Video Game), Patroclus (Hades Video Game), Theseus (Hades Video Game), Zagreus (Hades Video Game)

Relationships: Achilles/Patroclus/Zagreus (Hades Video Game), Patroclus/Zagreus (Hades Video Game)

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2022-02-25

Updated: 2022-10-08

Packaged: 2022-12-19 10:45:12

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 9

Words: 24,800

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Zagreus has a clear mission: escape his home planet and his father, get to the spaceport Olympus, and find his family and his mother.

Right away, he manages to crash the shuttle Thanatos lent him, and then get caught stowing away on the starship *Styx*. Thankfully, *Styx* is co-captained by Zagreus' cousin, Hermes, who agrees to ferry him as far as Asphodel as long as Zagreus does him a favor and takes a piece of illegal tech to Olympus for destruction. Easy, right?

Easy. Until Zagreus discovers the living soul of a shade within the device.

1. the Styx

Author's Note:

HELLO welcome to maybe the weirdest AU i've ever written but also my most favorite! For anyone wondering, I have 10 chapters of this finished already so 15 is an estimate but this bad boy is rolling and it's not stopping! Thanks to everyone in the Horse who encouraged me to get this thing started!

Summary for the Chapter:

Zagreus is caught stowing away aboard the *Styx*, and is given a task to do for his troubles.

Zagreus stared into endless violet eyes, so bright he got teary looking at them. All around him was a choking fog which smelled of incense and dying flowers, and there was a firm grip on his ankle, so tight he couldn't decide whether that squeeze or the blood rushing to his head was worse.

Because he was upside-down. He was upside-down and being dangled over the toothy skeletal maw of a creature who had just apprehended Zagreus trying to sneak onto his ship, whacked him over the head with an oar (Zagreus didn't understand why he had an oar, it was outer space, you didn't need oars) and dangled him while threatening to eat him. Probably. He either couldn't understand the fellow's language or those strange, guttural noises were not words at all.

"I'm sorry!" Zagreus yelped. "I didn't mean to—you can just drop me back off at that station and I'll be on my way, really, sir, you don't have to—"

"My dear associate," said a voice from behind the alien who had Zagreus dangling like a fish on a hook, "has remarked that you did not pay the fare for passage aboard our barge."

"I'm sorry!" he repeated. "I can pay you, if you let me down!"

There was another horrifying rattle from the beast below him. Staring directly into his mouth, Zagreus could see his decaying throat thrum with it. Euck.

"Quite right, Charon," said the intelligible voice. He seemed to be addressing the death's-maw as if he could understand him. Maybe Zag's comm was fucked. He did mess around with it to shut off the channels to Tartarus, keep his father from howling in his ear all the time. Gods knew Hades would yell at Zagreus until he came back out of sheer desire to keep his ears from bleeding.

"What's he saying? Are you going to eat me?"

There was a bright peal of laughter from whoever was speaking, and the skeletal maw belonging to one 'Charon', apparently, issued several puffs of smoke like he, too, was having a good chuckle over Zag's misfortune.

"I'm afraid you'd be quite poor for his diet, my good man. Charon, let the boy down, I think we've scared him enough."

Miracle of all miracles, Charon obeyed. Zagreus was dropped from a height, sure, but he landed none the worse for wear except for several bruises and psychological terror that might last eons.

He found himself looking up at a creature that looked very much like a dead man, and a man who looked so alive he was floating with his own energy. They couldn't be more opposite if they tried, Charon in dark, worn-out, ground-sweeping robes and enough gold to sink an escape pod, not to mention a wide-brimmed hat that hid most of his face in shadow if you weren't being dangled directly over it. His partner was dressed in white and orange and some of the flashiest tech Zagreus had seen in years. It made Zag's eye look like cheap junk.

There were two attachments on his head in the shape of wings, and two on his boots that matched, and they actually seemed to be keeping him aloft. Over his shoulders was slung a floaty cloak that glimmered with its own solar array, which was probably powering the boots and the wings, if Zag had to guess. He had a half-dozen comm pieces studding each ear, as if he

needed to know every language in the galaxy or call twelve people at once. And on top of it all, he was wearing a wide, knowing smile, complete with a look of recognition.

"You're him, aren't you?"

"Shit," Zagreus muttered. Were they about to turn right back around and start sailing him back to Tartarus? Please no. He'd rather not. Even if they dropped him on that little boulder of a station he'd stopped over on with that guy Sisyphus, that'd be better sending him to than the House of Hades' doorstep.

"Must be." Hermes planted his hands on his hips. "Well, not to worry, then, O Prince of the Underworld, we've been told to give you safe passage. I think your indiscretions can be overlooked."

"What?" This was news to Zag, for sure.

"Our orders come from Nyx."

Nyx?

Of course Zagreus knew Nyx, she had built the foundations Tartarus stood upon. Once, it had been a mysterious land, a deep-space rock known only to the denizens who lived there. It had been colonized and turned into the living cemetery it was today by Zag's father. Nyx usually went along with Hades, keeping peace and balance in the House. Her sons even followed Hades' every instruction better than Zagreus did.

Most of the time.

Until Thanatos let Zagreus snag that off-planet transport.

"Allow me to introduce us." He stuck a hand in Zagreus' face and hauled him to his feet. "This is Charon, eldest of Nyx's sons, pilot of the *Styx*, which you are now aboard, thanks for noticing."

Was that the name of this vessel? Zagreus thought he might've seen something like that carved in the wood. He had been focused on all the

skulls along the prow, especially on climbing in through one of the eye sockets of said skulls and break through the grating to get into the cargo hold.

"And I'm Hermes."

Now *that* was a name Zagreus knew.

"You're an Olympian."

Not just anybody who called the spaceport Olympus home could hold the title of '*Olympian*'. That honor belonged to thirteen individuals—fourteen, before Hades was exiled.

"More importantly, I'm your cousin!" Hermes announced.

And Charon was Thanatos' brother, but Zagreus decided not to mention Than, not sure whether he'd been implicated in Zagreus' escape. "Well, um, it's a pleasure?"

"*And* we're your ticket out of here, if you do us a favor."

"What favor?" Zagreus asked, hope flooding dangerously into his mind. He was halfway to agreeing no matter what he'd owe them.

"We stop off on Asphodel, but we've got a bit of cargo that needs to go all the way to Olympus. And all the way to the top, if you get my drift. Deliver it to Zeus, and you're free. You'll probably get a good deal of esteem up there on Olympus, too," Hermes said.

Charon shook his head, the rim of coins hanging around his hat clinking back and forth into one another. "*Grrrrroooaaah*."

"Yes, yes, go sail this boat, I'll do my bargaining, thanks, boss."

Charon slunk away, clinking all the while.

Hermes looked at Zagreus. "You look like you could use something to eat. Come back to my cabin, why don't you?" he proposed.

It wasn't like Zagreus could say no. They had him virtually captive.

And also he was really hungry.

— — —

Hermes' cabin was the most lavish place Zagreus had been since he left his father's halls.

The walls were all covered in silk brocade, and the floors, which was dull and grayed with age on the rest of the vessel, had been polished to a shine in here. There was a screen built into an ornate picture frame, displaying a number of ledgers, which Hermes passed a hand over and turned into a portrait of himself as they entered. Most of the wall space was taken up by shelves, all of which were full of strange objects in magnetized glass cases, labeled with the names of ports in neat, slanted handwriting. Zagreus had his focus on what looked like a severed hand when Hermes cleared his throat and indicated for Zagreus to take a seat at the small table near the entrance to the room.

Hermes, himself, sat on his bed, a four-poster affair with gauzy curtains that reflected strangely in the light from the lamp installed in the ceiling, which swung back and forth with the movement of the ship. *Styx* was an old starship, creaking and hissing and sounding practically alive. Here in her belly, Zagreus could hear the energy cores humming and crackling. Out the small porthole window, he could see her spitting purple smoke, which dissipated into space far behind them.

Hermes gave Zagreus a bowl of some of the most interesting food he'd ever seen—everything on Tartarus was rehydrated or liquified or processed and re-processed to handle the shipping over lightyears of deep space. The food he'd given Zagreus was some sort of grain, with chunks of fruits or vegetables (Zag wasn't sure which) and a sauce on top, served with a piece of flat bread, which Zagreus tried to eat on its own before noting that Hermes dipped his into the food and ate that way. It was good, although hot enough to burn his tongue. Food on Tartarus usually wasn't heated, energy resources were always at a premium.

They ate in relative silence, Hermes opening up a book and tapping away at some kind of note or communication. It was only after they'd finished that Hermes got into exactly what he wanted Zagreus to do.

He took Zagreus' bowl and deposited it with his own into a slot that must have connected to the ship's kitchen, then crossed to one of his massive wall shelves, and removed a small, cylindrical glass case with a smaller metal disc suspended in it.

"I don't know how much you know about Olympians," Hermes said, "but I serve as somewhat of a courier for my father—your uncle. I handle a lot of dangerous artifacts and powerful items. Magic and technology both."

He spun the dials on the brass locking mechanism that held the glass case shut, and it popped off with a little pneumatic huff.

"And which is this?" Zagreus asked.

"I suppose you could say it's a bit of both." Hermes tipped the case and the disc sealed in it, no longer held in suspension, dropped into his palm. He passed it into Zagreus' hand.

It fit neatly into his palm, cool metal that looked like bronze. On one face, there was a motif shaped like a wreath of laurels, similar to the one Zagreus had worn as the mark of his princehood, up until he left most of it at home like a glowing red goodbye. The laurel on the disc was inscribed in blue light, and in the center of the wreath there was an embossed star, the edges of it worn dull with time.

Zagreus turned it over in his hand. On the opposite side there was a serial number, half of which was worn away as well, and the other half of which was scratched and nicked. Below that, there was a name that had been lovingly carved in, although it was mostly eroded, too. The ocular implant in Zagreus' right eye caught the part that was visible, and displayed a translation for him.

Kleos.

"What is it?" Zagreus asked Hermes.

"*Who* is it," Hermes corrected him, and Zagreus realized what he was holding.

"It's a shade."

It was differently shaped from the ones at the House. Those were about the length of Zagreus' forearm, shaped a little like a keyhole, and had a portrait of the person whose data was stored in the AI core above an inscription of their name and cause of death.

"An illegally created shade," Hermes said.

Zagreus knew the process for getting one's data—one's *soul*— put into a shade was extensive: nightmarishly bureaucratic, exorbitantly costly, and had to be planned far, far in advance of that person's death. Virtually only the extremely wealthy did it, and even then, if you died too far from a facility that could upload your consciousness, you were fucked unless Thanatos could get there fast.

"How could somebody just *create* a shade?" he asked. The process itself was proprietary—Hades held all the patents, and since Hades was immortal, he would hold them in perpetuity until the end of time.

"Dunno. That's why Olympus wants this. We need to crack it, figure out how somebody learned it. Otherwise, people could go illegally creating them willy-nilly without the gods' approval. And then it needs to be destroyed."

"Is it operational?"

"Not that I can tell," Hermes said. "I don't get any signal from it. They're not a particularly chatty bunch, though, shades. I transport them when Thanatos' workload is too big, sometimes."

"Huh." Zagreus turned the shade over again, looking at the front and then the back. "Do we know who it was?"

Hermes tapped the inscription on the back side. "That name's all we have. Or, what I'm assuming is what's left of a name."

"Interesting. Sure, I'll take it to Olympus," Zagreus said. If such a quest was the price for his freedom, it felt like a small one. He was practically a delivery boy, taking an inoperable piece of tech to the gods.

"Brilliant!" Hermes said, his grin brightening. "Well, good. Now we won't have to throw you in the brig for the night."

"That's lucky, huh?"

"Indeed. Now, off to bed with you. We'll land on Asphodel at six, and not a moment later. I run on a tight schedule, and I have deliveries to prep!"

"Yes, of course," Zagreus said, obediently making his way to his feet and to the door while Hermes flittered between his shelves. Those wings must have been handy for reaching the top ones. "Hey, Hermes?" he added, an idea blossoming in his head. "Do you happen to have a spare comm? This one's been acting odd." He flicked the laurel leaf that hung from his right ear, the only remaining part of his wreath.

"Sure thing, coz," Hermes said, almost absent-minded, "in there."

Zagreus pulled open the armoire drawer Hermes had indicated, and discovered that Hermes not only had a spare, he had a spare *array*. Zagreus picked up one that looked like the golden bars Hermes wore, threading it through the piercing on his left ear and turning his off in favor of the new comm. "Thanks, mate. I'll leave you to it."

Hermes flapped a hand at him, flittering among his goods, paying Zagreus no mind.

— — —

Zagreus was given a bunk in the berth with the rest of the crew, and he pulled the curtains over it shut to keep out the noise of the men changing shifts around him. A lot of them were Bloodless, which meant they looked

similar to Charon (although Charon was a god), and it was eerie to watch them wander around. There was a particularly chatty one who talked Zag's ear off if he didn't make it immensely clear he wasn't interested in conversation. He was affable, but after an exhausting day, Zagreus tired of conversation. If he had to see the voice-box disc in Skelly's mouth flap around one more time...

He put the shade in the front pocket of his jacket, zipping it closed, keeping his ticket to freedom close to his chest.

He ran through his route in his head. From Asphodel, he would catch a freighter to Elysium. From Elysium, whatever transport he could get.

And then...

Olympus.

2. Asphodel

Summary for the Chapter:

On a sweltering planet too close to the sun, Zagreus meets a dryad, and then meets an unexpected passenger on his mission.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much for the support on ch. 1! This AU is probably one of the weirdest but best things I've ever written and I'm so excited to have you all meet my favorite little robot guy.

Asphodel was too close to its sun for Zag's liking.

Maybe if he'd prepared better for the climate, he wouldn't be in such a state, but he was in gear that would serve him better in the cold halls of Tartarus than the heat of Asphodel.

He was staying at an inn that was in the middle of an active volcano, a lake of lava all around. It truly was a scenic view, from what Zagreus could see through the reinforced windows. He only wished it wasn't so bloody hot. There was also the unavoidable sulfuric smell reminded him of certain areas of the production facilities back home, but Asphodelians burned a lot of incense to keep it at bay, so it wasn't a real complaint.

Hermes and Charon dropped him off at six, as planned ("room fee's paid, the owner owes us one") but Zagreus had no idea how he was going to get off-planet. He had two days (one night) before he'd have to either leave or pay his own room and board with the funds he'd snatched on his way out of Tartarus. The room was nice, small, but well-appointed. He left it immediately, as there was no way he'd find a route off-planet from inside a locked door.

He considered leaving his overcoat behind, sweltering heat and all, but his cargo was in the pocket and Zagreus wasn't about to leave it behind.

The inn was busy with people coming and going, everyone too harried to have any time to stop and talk to some boy looking to hitch a ride. It was clearly a come-and-go for traders, the Helios Company in particular. If Zagreus wanted to have any luck stopping someone for more than a ten-second conversation which went something along the lines of, *"I don't have time to talk, kid,"* he'd have to wait until the cycle settled, and this round of commercial travel had gone through.

Still, it was a bit of a thrill to be caught up in all this, the bustle of an active planet, of *people*, real people, not just automatons piloted by shades with a few primordial beings scattered about. He leaned back against the wall, watching everyone come and go, and would have been content to watch all afternoon until he heard something from around the corner.

Music. In one of the most beautiful voices he had ever heard. There was no metallic tinge to it that would make Zagreus think it was a speaker or a robot with a voice box. He looked around for the source, and found it coming from the back of the dining area.

"Good riddance, to all the thieves..."

While everyone else continued about their business, Zagreus ducked through swinging double doors and into the inn's kitchen, following the song.

"...To all the fools that stifled me..."

There was either a woman or a tree standing in the kitchen.

Okay, so it was definitely a woman, probably part tree. Zagreus had never seen a being like her before, skin made of wood, hair a veritable forest of rustling leaves. At first, he thought she had more tattoos than he did, and then he realized they had been painted on. And she was still singing, her voice clear and enchanting, only little pauses in her tune as she moved and shifted around her kitchen, stirring various pots and dumping ingredients in. Zagreus didn't know anything about cooking, but she seemed extremely competent, and if the delightful smells of the kitchen were anything to go by, she was making something delicious.

"...They've come and gone, and passed me by— oh! Hey, don't go standing the doorway like that," she said, turning and smiling at him.

Her face looked more human than the rest of her. Although her skin was still wooden, it looked more like it was polished, or had been rubbed with oil to make her cheeks shine when they rounded with her smile and her browbone sparkle when she cocked her head at him.

"My apologies, ma'am," Zagreus said, giving her a little half-bow of deference. "I was stopped in my tracks by your song. You have the most stunning voice I've ever heard."

"Now, now. I've heard that line before." She wagged a ladle at him. "That's what all the handsome boys say. Give me your name before you tell me how stunning I am, please. I'll even trade your mine in return."

"I'm Zagreus," he said.

"Eurydice," she replied. "What brings you back here, Zagreus? Did you miss the 'employees only' sign on the door?"

"I might have ignored it. Forgive me, miss Eurydice."

"You," Eurydice said, turning back to her many bubbling pots, "look like it's your first day off some backwater pebble of a planet. Am I right? Have you never seen a dryad before?"

He couldn't help but laugh. "You're correct in that I've never seen anyone like you before. However, I must inform you, it's my *second* day off my backwater planet." He left off the name, lest she realize he was telling a partial truth. Tartarus may have been remote but it was no pebble.

"Oh, forgive me, you must have become a worldly and seasoned traveler in the first cycle."

"Indeed I have."

"Hand me three bowls, would you?" she asked, and Zagreus obediently passed them over. "Thanks, you're a doll." She filled each one with a

different soup, then passed them through the small window between the kitchen and dining area, where another employee of the inn collected them on a tray. "If you want to chat, you need to help," she told him. "I love having someone else in the kitchen but I can't stand lollygaggers."

"Yes, ma'am. What shall I do? I warn you, I do not know the first thing about kitchens," Zagreus said.

"And *that's* the second thing all the handsome young men say. You look like you're good with a knife. Am I right?"

"Decent enough."

"Then finish chopping those," she said, pointing him to a long board full of root vegetables. She'd started cutting some, and so he could mimic what she'd done with relative ease, cutting them into small cubes. She pulled open an oven, which released a heavenly smell, and then she shut it and input a few more minutes onto the timer inlaid in its front. "Now, Zagreus, what brings you off your backwater planet?"

He could be honest in this, at least. "Running from my father."

"Oh?" With a single syllable, she prompted him to spill as much as he could.

"Yes, he's—if you'll excuse my language—a horrible prick. I'll never be good enough for him to even give me the honor of calling me my name and not 'boy', so when I found out my mother was still alive, off-planet, well. I left."

"Fuck him, then. *If you'll excuse my language*," she said, breezing past him and looking at his progress. "That's good, hon, keep it up. Where's your mom?"

"I don't know," Zagreus admitted. "I was hoping if I made it to Olympus, I could find her."

Eurydice nodded, the leaves on her head rustling with it. "I see, I see. Olympus is a good place to start. Although, you'll need to stop looking so goggle-eyed, or someone's going to fleece you for everything you've got."

"I'll try?"

"I mean, I'm already getting you to work for me, even though you're paying to stay here," she pointed out.

"But I don't mind that," Zagreus said. "Unless you wanted to keep me here, I would mind that. I haven't had much luck finding a way off Asphodel, though."

Eurydice hummed, serving up another round of platters. "Well, my supplier comes through tomorrow before dawn. They'll go as far as Elysium."

"Your supplier?" Zagreus asked.

"Of course. You think I grow all these vegetables here? In the middle of a lava pit? You're something else, hon. No, I have a ship come in. They can always use extra hands loading and unloading, so if you work for them, they won't mind ferrying you. Are you as good at lifting heavy things as you are with a knife?"

"Even better," said Zagreus. "I'm stronger than I look."

"That's that, then," Eurydice said, with a decisive nod of her head. "Help me wash the dishes from the lunch rush and then come back and do it again for dinner, and I'll make sure Hektor has you onboard tomorrow morning."

"Yes, ma'am!" Zagreus said. "I'm done with these, by the way." He gestured to the cutting board.

"Oh, no, I need those done, too," she told him, pointing to an entire *mountain* of vegetables that Zagreus had assumed was a week's worth of food. "A lot of hungry folk come through here, hon. Better get started."

This might not be as easy as it had first seemed.

— — —

Zagreus was thoroughly exhausted by the time he returned to his room after the dinner rush. It was a the sort of tired that came with a hard day's work, and he collapsed onto his bed with a smile.

He kicked off his boots and pulled off his jacket, undoing his belt to drop his tunic as well before lying down fully, not wanting to get his sheets dirty. He'd spilled more sauce on his clothes today than he'd ever anticipated. Thankfully, it was hard to stain black and red clothes.

He held his overcoat to his chest as he lay on the bed, the old springs in the mattress creaking with his every movement. It was thick canvas, and had once been a worker's jacket from the shade processing plant on Tartarus, but Zagreus had sewn patches in the shape of dog skulls onto both shoulders, just so his personal aesthetic was still broadcasted to the world even if somebody couldn't see his tattoos of the same motif beneath. He'd added a solar proximity charger in the shape of a ring of laurels around the collar to keep his comms going, and he'd sewn a simple strip of red fabric over the symbol of the House of Hades on the sleeve so that his most identifying mark was gone.

Well. Not his *most* identifying mark. That was the tattoo in the same shape on his right wrist, which was hidden by a criss-crossing band of red fabric, until he could get it covered up with more ink.

Most importantly, though, his jacket had the small weight of the shade in the hidden pocket just over Zagreus' chest. He unzipped it and slipped out the disc, holding it in his palm.

"Let's see if we can get you talking, yeah?"

He performed the right pattern of movements that opened the holographic comm interface on his ocular implant, reaching out to flip on the laurel-leaf comm in his right ear. Feedback rang through his ears and he winced, tapping hard at the midair hologram to change the frequency of the laurel's comm so that it no longer matched the one he'd borrowed from Hermes.

Zagreus had discovered a long time ago that with enough fine-tuning with lower communicator frequencies, you could talk to low-powered shades. There were nasty little catches to how Tartarus was run: if a shade's family stopped paying maintenance fees, that shade wouldn't get run through another power cycle, and they went from being able to have full conversations to just being able to project simple characters. Smile, frown, shock, annoyance, that sort of thing. It was like they had facial expressions but couldn't speak.

But Tartarus, being in possession of so many shades, was home to some of the most powerful dead creators of their age, and therefore had tech that was only outclassed by Haphaestus himself. Daedalus, in particular, who lived inside an android body of his own creation, developed a number of systems Tartarus used. While considered basic tech on Tartarus, Daedalus' inventions were more finely crafted than anything you'd find around the galaxy.

It meant that, with enough finagling, Zagreus could turn his comm to a low enough frequency that he could communicate with a shade that was running on reserve power. He suspected this of his cargo—a shade that was completely nonfunctional wouldn't have the glowing blue light that filled the laurel symbols on its face. There was some life left in this one, and Zagreus was immensely curious about who it was.

He heard the link connect, a low electronic hum.

"Hello?" he tried. "Erm, my good shade, may I have a word?"

There was a pause, and Zagreus almost reached for his screen again to fine-tune some more.

And then: "*...who's there?*"

He grinned, kicking his feet back and forth in delight. It was a faint voice, filtered through layers of static. But it was a voice. "I'm Zagreus. Who are you?"

With a little more adjustments, the voice came through even clearer. *"I'm... I don't recall."*

That was unusual. The entire point of having a shade was that all one's earthly memories, even ones that were forgotten with time and age, were perfectly preserved. Perhaps whatever unofficial method was used to create this one hadn't quite succeeded in that effort.

"That's fine. Do you, uh, know *what* you are?" Zagreus asked, full of an unexpected dread at the idea that the shade might not know they were a shade.

"I'm aware of my own demise, yes." There was a hint of amusement in the voice. The more Zagreus spoke with them, the more he learned. The voice read as masculine to him, but it was gentle even when they appeared to be teasing.

"Oh, thank the gods. I was worried I'd have to break the news."

"You shouldn't worry. I'm the dead one."

"Do you know who put you in this shade?"

"No. The first thing I remember is being released from stasis and handed to you."

"How much sensory input do you have?" Zagreus asked, just barely reining in the need to ask question after question.

"I don't know, what parameters are you judging that by?" the shade asked.

"Can you feel if I do this?" Zagreus tossed the shade into the air and caught it.

"Unfortunately, yes, I can." There was a sigh, crackling through his comm. *"I can feel movement. Hot and cold. I don't have a precise sense of touch but I assume you are holding me in your hand because I can tell your palm is warm. I could probably feel if you dropped me, but I'll thank you not to try."*

"Yes, sir. Can I call you 'sir'? Are you a man?"

"I'm a man, yes. Something about being addressed as 'sir' feels irritating to me. Choose something else."

"All I can read on your face is 'Kleos'. Can I call you 'Kleos'?"

"You may. How did you speak to me? I was calling out earlier and you did not respond."

"I'm sorry I didn't hear you before," Zagreus said. "I had to re-tune my comms."

"Where in the world did you learn to do a thing like that?"

"I'm from Tartarus. Wait, if you were calling out for me... does that mean you hear me even without my comms tuned for you? Can you hear other people as well?"

"Do you mean to ask if I heard all your many conversations with that dryad in the kitchen? Yes. I did. A piece of advice: if you were trying to flirt with her, you might've started with not asking her so much about her ex-husband."

"I wasn't trying to flirt with her, I'm just being friendly," Zagreus said, flipping Kleos over in his palm.

"Stop doing that. I may not be able to become nauseous anymore, but I don't enjoy the sensation of being moved around without my will."

"Well, you can't move around otherwise," Zagreus said.

"Then don't move me around unnecessarily."

"Fine." Zagreus set Kleos on his chest. "Is this better?"

"...it is fine."

"Okay. Well, if you can hear me talking, you probably know that I'm going to Olympus. Do you... did you hear what Hermes told me?"

"Hermes, if that's the man who had me in stasis, purposefully scrambles his voice for any electronic receivers. I couldn't hear a word from him."

"Oh." Zagreus thought for a moment, considering keeping the mission Hermes had sent him on a secret. It felt wrong, given that this shade was an active, living soul (as alive as an artificial soul inside a shade could be). "He wants me to take you to the Olympians to be analyzed and then destroyed. You weren't put into a shade, er, legally."

There was a long silence from Kleos.

"I see."

"I'm not going to!"

"You ought to." Kleos sighed again. "Zagreus, I don't know how I got here, but I don't particularly like the idea of being a shade. Sitting for eternity in the halls of Tartarus with only other half-dead souls to converse with? It sounds like a horrible way to spend time. I'd rather take my chances with whatever afterlife exists, if it's all the same."

"It's not all that bad."

"You didn't want to be trapped for eternity in Tartarus, either, if I'm interpreting your conversation with the dryad correctly."

This was a fair point. Zagreus ran his fingers through his hair, missing the smooth slide of his laurel leaves. He still hadn't gotten used to not wearing them. "Well. If that's the case, I suppose I will have to respect your wishes. But I will endeavor to make your last journey as interesting as possible."

"Hooray."

"I wonder if this is how Thanatos feels when he ferries new shades to Tartarus." Zagreus didn't even know if Than talked to them on the transport,

or if he just brought them all in silently and programmed them into Tartarus' power bank.

"Is it worth anything to speculate?"

"I suppose not." Zagreus ran his fingers over the swooping shape of the laurels on Kleos' face. "I ought to go shower before bed." After a day of hard work, he sorely needed it. "You should be glad you don't have a sense of smell."

"I unfortunately do still possess the capability to produce mental images. Go, leave me here."

"You don't want a bath?"

"Finding out how waterproof I am is about as low on my list of interests as finding out whether I break if you drop me."

"I wasn't gonna put you in the shower, gods. I meant in the polisher."

"No, thank you, I'm endeavoring to develop a patina."

"Whatever you say," Zagreus said, through poorly stifled laughter.

He put Kleos back in his jacket pocket and hung it on the peg beside the bed before ducking into the bathroom. His clothes went in the washer-dryer installed into the wall, and he put his comms in the polisher where Kleos expressly did not want to go, darting back into the room to grab the rocket attachments off his boots and tossing them in, too, to get rid of all the space dust and Asphodelian soot.

When he popped his comms back in after his shower, he couldn't hear Kleos, so he peeked into his pocket. There was the static-fuzz of Kleos' comm link connecting, like Zagreus had bumped a sleeping man's shoulder and he'd opened his eyes.

"What?" Kleos asked eventually.

"Just checking on you," he said.

"Thanks," Kleos responded dryly. "Now go to bed. If you do have to get up before dawn tomorrow, you likely need to sleep."

"You wanna come under the covers?"

"I do not."

Zagreus probably wasn't going to go under the covers, either. Asphodel. Too damn hot.

3. Elysium pt. 1

Summary for the Chapter:

On the journey to Elysium, Zagreus gets to know Kleos better. Once he lands, he's completely swept away by the incredible new planet he's arrived on.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello and welcome to ZAGREUS DISCOVERS PLANTS! I'm so excited because the Elysium chapters are some of my absolute favorites <3

At first, Zagreus thought the captain and first mate of the *Scamandrios* were demigods.

He didn't get a chance to ask, because when Eurydice said he was going to help with the load/unload, she meant *immediately*, and so Zagreus was busy hauling things off the ship and into her kitchen storerooms. He was working alongside a man who was friendly enough and who gave him the low-down, because it was either that or whistling while he worked, and apparently his whistling was terribly shrill, so the men didn't mind his chatter.

He learned that the men were Trojan.

Zagreus knew there had been a war about fifteen years ago, and he knew that Olympus had been involved. There would have been a lot less survivors if his father hadn't put a moratorium on deaths of those who were slated for Tartarus, because their power reserves were running too low.

Word had it that because all the demigods and royals were to be installed in Tartarus, the gods stopped the war. But not before they crushed the stronghold of Troy with seismic activity that nearly split the planet in half and sent everyone scattering. Thanatos had told him that fate had decreed Troy's destruction, and if the mortals couldn't destroy themselves, Poseidon the Earth-shaker could do carry it out.

Despite this knowledge, Zagreus hadn't expected to see the effects firsthand.

Hektor, the captain of the *Scamandrios*, had scars that glowed bright yellow-orange as if they'd been healed with some sort of bioluminescent stitching, and Helenus, his first mate, had ocular implants that glowed with the same light. They'd been patched up and upgraded by Apollo, or so said Zagreus' gossipy new friend. Helenus also had several artificial fingers. Those, too, were a result of the war.

Their crew was made up mostly of veterans, and Helenus was not the only one missing limbs, but he did have the most sophisticated tech replacing his. They were princes, almost the whole crew, but Troy's economy had been destroyed along with the planet, and even their former princes got by with the most basic of mobility tech, bulky and slower to move than a natural limb would be.

They worked fast despite this, and Zagreus had to put in effort to keep up.

Once everything was loaded onboard the ship, though, Zagreus didn't have much to do. The operations of any vessel larger than the transport shuttle he'd escaped on were beyond him. Any of the crew who weren't working were sleeping, so he was lacking for conversation as well. To remedy this, he asked whoever was nearest if there was a quiet room where he could make a call.

"That thing does long-range?" asked the man he spoke to, nodding at Zag's comm.

"Yeah," he said, "it's from Hermes."

"Nice. Well, not much is quiet around here, but there's a storage room." He pointed. "Should at least keep your call private."

In truth, Zagreus hadn't explored whether Hermes' comm did long-range. He didn't have anybody to long-range call, anyhow.

He sat on top of a storage crate, leaning his head back against the wall. He reached into his coat and unzipped his breast pocket, tugging Kleos out and holding him in his cupped hands. "How's your day been?" he asked the little shade.

"A fascinating crash course in recent military history," Kleos said.

"Right? I don't know half of what he's talking about."

"You would think some of the souls in Tartarus would have told you."

"Most of them didn't die in the war. The ones that did don't like to talk about it," Zagreus said. "You can read their cause of death, it's inscribed on them, but I think that's mostly because otherwise the go-to conversation opener would be 'so, how'd you die?' and that's a big downer."

"Is my cause of death inscribed on me?" Kleos asked.

Zagreus knew it wasn't, but he flipped Kleos over to look at the back as if some new inscription would have been unveiled. "It is not, unless it's worn off. You're a bit banged up, my friend."

"Perhaps my last keeper did not take care of me," he said.

Zagreus ran his fingers over the scrapes and dents on Kleos' back side before turning him back over. "It seems that way. I'll try to do better."

Kleos was quiet for a while. *"Thank you,"* he said eventually. *"I don't really care one way or another, but I appreciate your attempts at providing some dignity to me."*

"Of course." Zagreus ran his thumb around the edges of the star embossed in the center of Kleos' face. Kleos couldn't feel it, but Zagreus liked the texture of smooth metal under his fingers, liked to feel the even indentations of the laurel leaves ringing the circumference of him. "You're still a person."

"I am the codified remnants of a human soul trapped in a device approximately the size and shape of a jelly donut."

Zagreus was glad Kleos could not see him grinning at his misfortunes, tickled by the way Kleos put his current state "Honestly, Kleos, after living my whole life on Tartarus, that sounds like a person to me."

"You have been gravely misled."

"Perhaps." He waved his hand over Kleos, watching the faint blue light from his laurels reflect onto his palm. "Say, I know you don't remember how you died or how you got to Hermes or anything, but do you remember anything else about your mortal life? Like your family, or your friends, or where you come from, or what you look like?"

There was a thoughtful hum. *"No. Nothing. Sorry. Want to imagine what I looked like? I like to picture myself as being a giant. Ten feet tall, with claws like razors and wings and fearsome teeth. But I was probably just a man."*

"You are a man that someone cared about enough to codify and trap his soul in a device approximately the size and shape of a jelly donut. I was wondering if we could find somebody connected to you."

"If I can't remember my own name, we are at quite a loss for anyone else's. In fact, I only currently know the name you've given me, and your name. I would say I know the captain of this ship or that dryad you were talking to, but I didn't try to remember them."

"If you can remember my name, I'm pleased. It means your memory is working." It would be even harder to find anyone he could connect Kleos with if his memory was in a state of constant failure.

"And what do you look like, Zagreus? Let me put a face to the name, as it were."

Zagreus snorted. "Not a very interesting face, to be sure. I'm a man. I'm short, skinny, but I've got some muscle, I guess. My hair is black. I'm too pale, all those years in Tartarus. One of my eyes is green and the other one's an ocular implant that's red and black."

"And you're handsome."

"What?"

"The dryad said so."

He supposed she had. "I think she was joking."

"Ah, so you are funny looking, then."

"Yes. The silliest looking little man you will ever see," said Zagreus, happy to leave it at that. "Kleos, if I take a nap aboard this ship, will you shout in my ear if somebody comes in?"

"I can't exactly keep watch, as I lack eyes, but certainly if I hear someone, I will perform my best attempt at shouting."

Zagreus leaned his head back against the wall, listening to the hum of the ship around him and the static of his connection to Kleos. "Thanks."

— — —

When they landed, Zagreus assisted in unloading the *Scamandrios*, and then he was free to explore Elysium, which he'd been itching to do ever he'd seen its blue-green swirl from the atmosphere. Everywhere he went was like nowhere he'd ever seen before (because Zagreus hadn't seen a lot of places) but Elysium was like nowhere he'd even *imagined*.

It was no wonder Eurydice got all of her produce from here. Elysium was lush to the nth degree, elaborate hydroponics making foliage grow from every surface. Long-limbed robots picked fruits from the trees and deposited them into huge baskets, where they would then be shipped all over the system. The farms were stories and stories high, turning the streets into a dense canopy lit by hanging UV bulbs that kept everything growing at a steady rate. Covered walkways spanned the streets, keeping passerby from being fried beneath the UV lights, and those, too, were thick with branches of flowering and fruiting vines.

"I wish you could see this," he said, in a single awestruck breath.

"Are you talking to me?" Kleos asked.

"Yeah."

"Don't address me in public. You look insane."

Plenty of people spoke into comms in public, but Zagreus didn't correct Kleos. He was busy looking at all the plants he couldn't name if he tried. He wanted to eat every single one of them.

Zagreus soon learned (from a very helpful vendor who told him the names of several fruits and chatted with him while he sampled them—his favorite was strawberries) that getting from Elysium to Olympus was going to be a challenge. Few ships went through the Cerberus belt, because it was such a challenge to pilot through and arrive undamaged.

"The *Bullhorn* goes through there," she'd told him. "They're contracted by Olympus, so they're paid for any asteroid strikes they take. But they're not docking here until next standard-cycle week."

This meant Zagreus had about five Elysium days to kill before he could get passage aboard the *Bullhorn*. He learned it was neither a commercial nor a passenger vessel, but a crew of privateers hired by Olympus to keep peace in the galaxy by attacking and defeating pirates. It sounded supremely exciting to Zag, who had martial skill enough that he certainly felt he could prove his worth as a privateer.

He'd been poking around trying to figure out where he could find some sort of work in exchange for lodging, when he reached an area of Elysium that didn't look quite as cultivated as the rest. The plants still grew lush and bountiful, but they weren't situated in neat rows of hydro towers, just massive trees, unevenly spaced, and whatever grew in around them.

And there was movement within them.

"Kleos," Zagreus said into his comm. "Do you know anything about what lives in forests?"

"All manner of creatures," Kleos said. "Why? Are you staring at something that looks like it's going to eat us? Because I think you would taste better than I."

"Very funny," he huffed.

In truth, he wasn't sure what he was looking at. It moved like a person, but any sort of animal or alien on this strange planet might. Zagreus thought he'd be best served to turn around, walk away, and head back to more civilized parts of the planet. However, this was too intriguing for him to simply ignore.

"Hello," he called into the brush. "Is somebody there? Give me a sign if I should come closer."

There was nothing but the rustling of more leaves. And then there was a giggle.

It was a little eerie, like it was echoed and far away, heard through a canyon. But that was distinctly a person of some sort, and Zagreus took a step closer. "Did you hear that?" he asked Kleos under his breath.

"It's a nymph," Kleos said. "An oread or a dryad, I think. Before you ask how I know that, I will tell you: I'm not sure."

A nymph would be nice. Eurydice was nice. Zagreus stepped closer, passing the border from the cobblestone pathways of Elysium into the untamed ground of the forest. It was darker inside, and his left eye took a moment to adjust, but his ocular implant caught sight of what looked like a young girl's face before she turned around and dashed further into the woods.

Zagreus sprinted a few paces after her, but then stopped. He was chasing a random child in the forest—oh no, was *he* the terrifying one?

"I am assuming you're trying to go after her," Kleos said, "given that you're running."

"Do you have any suggestions?"

"No. You're rather polite, so I don't think I have to tell you not to attack them."

"I wouldn't do that!" He set his implant to track movement and it caught her a ways ahead of him, peeking from behind a tree. She didn't continue running away, she just kept the distance between them the same and paused every so often to wait for him to catch up. It was almost like she was leading him somewhere.

"I think she wants me to follow her."

"Then, by all means, follow the strange little girl in the woods."

"Okay, then," he said, sure he was missing some sarcasm, and trotted off after her.

She led him deeper and deeper into the forest, and he kept track of her easily, which made him all the more certain she wasn't trying to hide. If she was, it would be easy to shake him, even with his right eye tracking her. Movement wasn't a reliable way to track, really, he'd need infrared, which he didn't have because most things in Tartarus didn't produce reliable heat signatures. Sometimes even his left eye caught sight of her, darting into beams of light that reached the forest floor.

Eventually, they came upon a sizable clearing, and Zag's natural eye had to adjust once more, as sparkling sunlight filled his vision. It was brighter here than it was in the rest of Elysium, where the spiraling towers of stone and rock dripping with foliage blocked out all but the artificial UV light that filtered purplish-blue down to the floor. This was pure, golden sunlight, making all the trees and the bushes look warm and soft and even greener.

The clearing was also occupied.

There was a large structure in the middle, a massive tree which had been hollowed out and had several wooden additions built onto it. All around it, there were people: climbing in the branches, swinging in hammocks strung

between them, painting designs on the sides of the trees, sitting around massive outdoor ovens and baking something that made Zagreus' mouth water even though he'd just eaten several fruits. The little girl who had led Zagreus there went running across the clearing and into the arms of a woman who was painting the walls of a structure that must have been newly added, the wood still bright and unfaded.

From what he could tell, they were all women. Some were very clearly dryads. like the girl he'd followed, but some looked like they had been born of the mountains or the rivers the same way Eurydice looked like she'd been born from the trees.

The little girl spoke in a language Zagreus didn't understand, but the his borrowed comm from Hermes picked it up and spat out a translation with almost no lag. "I found someone!" she was saying.

"Did you get that?" Kleos asked him.

"Yeah," Zagreus said, but before he could translate for Kleos, another woman joined them. She was tall and broad with skin the color and texture of slate and the fur of a fearsome creature wrapped around her shoulder, claws and teeth strung onto a layer of necklaces.

And she started off the conversation with: "this one wasn't meant to be here. End him."

4. Elysium pt. 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Zagreus is introduced to another of his cousins, and learns more about the strange corner of Elysium he's found his way to.

Notes for the Chapter:

ARTEMIS TIME! I'm so excited for her, I get all kinds of fun stuff with the gods in this AU! also please enjoy my nymph ocs <3

Zagreus backed off, holding up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I don't mean any trouble," he said. "I can just go. Just tell me the way and I'm gone."

"You do not even know where you are?" Now that she had heard him speak, the woman switched to Zagreus' language, although she had a thick accent.

"No," he said. "Um, she led me here?"

She said something in her own tongue which his comm couldn't exactly translate beyond 'profanities'.

The little girl spoke up again. It translated to, "Echo said she saw a handsome man in the woods and I found him for her."

"It wasn't him," said a third nymph, the aforementioned Echo, giving Zagreus a look that said the handsome man she'd seen was much better-looking than him.

The tall woman, who seemed to be the leader of the group, held up a hand and the girls stopped squabbling. "You," she said to Zagreus, "are in the sacred forest of Lady Artemis. I am Callisto. My sister was mistaken in bringing you here. But as it was simply a mistake, we will lead you back instead of killing you."

"Oh. Well, thank you," he said, but his mind was still caught on Lady Artemis. "May I speak to your lady before you go? I have... I have information for her."

Insular as these people seemed, he still couldn't go around telling them who he was. But Artemis was his cousin, and an Olympian, and if anyone on this planet could get him a lead on where his mother might be, it would be her.

Callisto gave him a pinched frown. "Our lady helps all supplicants of the forest. But many come here under false pretenses. How do we know you are true?"

He paused, trying to think how to answer, and Kleos suggested, *"show them you're not armed? Tell them you're appalled by the very idea of somebody entering a sacred forest to assault some nymphs?"*

Zagreus was appalled by that idea. "You don't," he said. "You have to trust me when I give you my word. And I've no doubt you can and will kill me if I do anything to harm your people."

Callisto cocked her head, considering. "In that, you are correct. I will take you to Lady Artemis. She can judge you more fully."

"Yes, ma'am."

The commotion summoned two more women who were built like warriors as Callisto was, both of whom walked behind Zagreus with impressively large spears while Callisto led him. Callisto's dryad sister, whose name Zagreus had not received, put her hand in his and trotted alongside, seemingly unperturbed by this procession. He was glad of her favor, as it seemed to be a major factor in keeping him alive.

They went inside the building constructed around the tree, but Zagreus had little time to marvel at the elaborately painted walls and the carved wooden support pillars. They exited out the back of the building, into a courtyard, where there was a running stream that led into an idyllic little pool, and a woman standing with a deer, inspecting its coat.

Animals were few and far between in Tartarus. Zagreus had already heard more of them in this forest than he'd ever seen in his life, and this deer was a particularly marvelous creature, so much larger than he had pictured them when he saw them in books, with two sets of antlers growing from its head, branching out wide and tall, and holding many little birds which peeped happily from their perches.

The woman, who must have been Artemis, was dressed in animal skins, and had hair as green as the foliage around them. Across her back was a longbow, and while it looked elaborately crafted, it appeared every part of it could be found in nature. It was not built of the same shiny bronze and intricate electronics as Hermes' wings or Zagreus' boots or even Kleos.

Callisto explained the situation at hand to Artemis, and they talked so fast, even Hermes' translator had trouble keeping up. It was decided that Artemis would handle Zagreus, while the others returned to their business and awaited her judgment on the situation.

And, thank the gods, this meant Zagreus was alone with his cousin.

"Who are you?" she asked archly. She may have been in charge of this place, but her voice sounded rather young, sharp and offended even though not a word had come from Zagreus' mouth.

"I am Zagreus," he said. "Son of Hades and Persephone. I was hoping to ask for your help, cousin."

Artemis gave him a steady stare, not disbelieving, but maybe a little perplexed.

Kleos lost his shit.

"Son of Hades? You told me you were from Tartarus, not the prince of the damn place."

"What do you intend to ask me?" Artemis said, unaware that Zagreus had a shade shouting in his ear.

Kleos had told him he'd look insane talking into his comm before, but if he did it now he'd just look rude. He had to ignore Kleos and continue. "I am searching for my mother. They say in all these years, she has not been found. I thought to go to Olympus, but I doubt they know."

"They don't," said Artemis.

"Ought I to start referring to you as 'Your Highness'?" said Kleos. Zagreus continued to ignore him and hoped he would take this as an answer in the negative.

"I feared as much." Zagreus sighed, running both hands through his hair. "But I can think of no better starting place."

"Nor can I," said Artemis. "But how did you intend to get to Olympus in the first place?"

"They say the Bullhorn leaves from here in a week's time."

His suggestion made Artemis frown, her nose wrinkling.

"What? Is that a bad idea?"

"No. I just dislike their captain immensely," she said.

"To be fair, she does seem to dislike you immensely, also," said Kleos.

Artemis sighed, patting the deer on its hindquarters, which sent it springing over the stream and bounding through the woods, only a white tail to show where it had been. The birds all fluttered off in a commotion of wingbeats.

"For the time being, then, you may stay here," Artemis said. "You are my cousin, and I would not turn you out. We need not tell my people precisely in what way you are related to me, I have numerous cousins." She frowned, again, at this. "Numerous siblings, too. The only stipulation is this: you must keep your distance from all of the women here."

"Okay?"

"Even if they show an interest in you, you must decline their advances."

He didn't think this was likely. All of the nymphs were truly impressive beauties and Zagreus was, well, Zagreus. "I don't think you have to worry."

"You say as much," Artemis said, pulling a knife out of her belt and using it to clean beneath her fingernails, "but we have had men come into our home before, and leave my girls heartbroken, or with children they did not intend to bear."

"Oh. That last bit is physically impossible, my lady." Zagreus was still flushed all the way to the tips of his ears from the implications. "Despite being a man, I am built in much the same way I presume you are." Although, it was always difficult to assume the shapes of gods.

Artemis slid the knife back into her belt, as if she was done trying to intimidate him. "So, you're saying I *don't* need to threaten to cut your balls off?" there was no note of humor in it, although overall it was sort of funny. Kleos was having a chuckle.

"Gods, no! Never had any in the first place." The idea of it still made him cringe with phantom pain.

Kleos was laughing more than Zagreus had ever heard him laugh, and even though he kept it to quiet sniggering, Zagreus had to bite down on a smile that would have been out of place in the present conversation.

Especially since Artemis followed up with, "I'll find something worse than castration if you break any of their hearts, then."

"Yes, ma'am. I solemnly swear I will not provoke anybody to fall in love with me."

She seemed to take this as enough of a promise, and gave him a sharp nod, then brushed past him and headed back inside. He wasn't sure if he was supposed to follow, but he trotted after her anyhow, hoping this was what she intended for him to do. Kleos was still laughing in his ear.

— — —

After an announcement from Artemis that her cousin would be staying with them for the next few days, and Zagreus' arrangements were prepared. He was given a room, which was in a high, remote part of the tree, and he had it all to himself, because Artemis was quite protective of her ladies even knowing the particulars of Zagreus' gender.

Zagreus, using what skill he'd managed to glean from Eurydice, assisted in preparing the evening meal, which was eaten while they sat around a fire listening to the nymphs tell haunting stories of what lurked in the woods at night until the youngest of them ran shrieking back to their beds. It was late when Zagreus returned to his room, glad at least that being alone meant he could speak with Kleos, who had been quiet during the afternoon and evening.

He'd been a bit worried about Kleos being discovered. The little girl, who he'd learned was called Dahlia and was not Callisto's blood sister but just a child all of them seemed to have adopted, kept picking Zag's pockets for fun. She hadn't managed to find his breast pocket where Kleos was—or she'd realized Zag would notice if she got in there—so his small companion was safe. For now. She was very tenacious.

The room took some effort to climb to—Zagreus had to make his way up a spiraling staircase that went around the outside of the tree, which was even more difficult in the dark. He didn't know how someone without an ocular implant that increased their night vision would do it, but none of the nymphs seemed to have any sort of tech attached to them. In fact, aside from a massive holographic map of the forest in the center of the base of the tree, there didn't seem to be any tech here at all.

His 'room' was less of a room and more a system of tightly woven netting that made up a semi-floor. If he moved the blankets and pillows piled atop it, he could see that his bed hung above the open tunnel that was the body of the tree. That long drop was terrifying to look down, so he didn't.

He hung his pack and his coat on the peg just inside the doorway, and removed Kleos from the pocket, then flopped down onto the bed, because

standing on it made him feel unsteady. The netting's holes were small enough that he couldn't put a foot through, but it still shifted and gave beneath his steps, and he felt much better when he was lying down.

He sat Kleos on his chest, rubbing his fingers over the star on his face. "Hey. Sorry about, um. Not being entirely truthful about who I am."

Kleos took a moment to speak up. *"It is fine, simply surprising. You don't exactly give the impression of royalty, my prince."*

The title, said with particular pointedness, only managed to make Zagreus feel overwarm. Kleos had a nice voice, soft and smooth, and sometimes his voice had such presence, it was as if gentle fingers were sliding down Zagreus' neck and his back. "Please don't call me that."

"Fine, fine. Then tell me of this place. Where are we?"

"Would you believe me if I told you we are about forty feet up a tree?"

"I did feel you climbing for a while. And it's swaying a little."

That would be the netting they were laying on. It was somewhat calming, like the motion of a ship beneath him. "Yeah. Well, you heard Artemis. She wants me to keep my distance."

"I'm starting to think you're a catch."

"I'm a novelty, among these women," Zagreus said. "Nothing more. Besides, I have no time for a relationship."

"Well, good, I'd rather not hear any of that."

Shit. Zagreus hadn't thought of that. He was going to have to be extremely quiet if he wanted some time to himself.

He cleared his throat. "A-hem, well, anyway, you won't have to worry. Say, does it bother you, sitting here? You're probably moving around while I'm breathing and such." It was as good a change of topic as anything.

"No, it does not bother me. It's strangely relaxing."

"Okay, then. I warn you, I do move around a lot in my sleep."

"I know. You had me in your pocket that first night, aboard the Styx. I don't mind."

"Say, Kleos. Do you sleep?"

"What do you mean? I have no body that needs resting, no."

True to his word, Zagreus shifted, cupping a hand around Kleos to keep him at the center of his chest, like he was cuddling a child's toy. "Right, but does your mind rest, or are you just awake and alert all night while I sleep, listening to me snore or whatever?"

"In periods of prolonged silence, I tend to sort of... drift. I suppose you could say I meditate. It takes time to walk through as many existential crises as each day brings me." He said it with lightness, almost a note of humor, but it made a pang of sadness resonate through Zagreus' chest, and he held Kleos a little tighter.

"I'll try to rise early, then," he said.

5. Elysium pt. 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Zagreus spends time with his cousin and her crew, gets closer with Kleos, and quenches his thirst a little.

Notes for the Chapter:

EYYYYYYYYY SMUT TIME!

This was one of the most fun sex scenes I've ever written, so I hope you enjoy!

He did rise early, but mostly because Dahlia was clambering up the steps calling for him. Zagreus, afraid that Artemis would be displeased by the youngest of her band of nymphs chasing after Zagreus where he was sequestered away, scrambled out of bed as fast as he could.

He did his best to follow the nymphs' instructions and to be as unobtrusive as possible throughout his days in Artemis' forest. They took him hunting on that first morning, but he was terrible at it, making too much noise and scaring away their game. After that, he was relegated to the camp itself, but there was much to do, and he helped wherever he could. They taught him how to build fires, how to care for the vegetable gardens, how to butcher their catches. Zagreus already knew how to fish, and was good enough at it that the nymphs praised him, which they did not do easily or for anything else.

Dahlia seemed to have adopted him as a sort of older brother, and was always flitting around, asking him what he was doing or showing him all of her toys. She appeared to be about ten or eleven, and she was the darling of the group, much younger than all the rest. Her hair was like the leaves of a willow tree, and was always falling in her face and had to be tied up every so often by another of the nymphs, although when they weren't looking, she shook it back out.

In the evenings, Zagreus climbed to the treetop and told Kleos about the people he lived among. There were twenty full-grown nymphs in the forest home, plus Dahlia, and Artemis herself. Kleos liked when Zagreus described their faces and the ways they dressed, the strange elements to their being that were unlike the people Zagreus had grown up around—hair made of leaves or eyes like a cat's or skin like mountain rocks. Kleos seemed to find all this interesting, which made Zagreus wonder whether he had ever seen someone like that while he was alive.

He told Kleos what Artemis looked like, too: the green marking over her dark eyes, which darted like a forest creature's, the birds that fluttered and landed on her shoulders and the curve of her bow. He told her of the moonstones she wore and the way her hair was braided and the particular quick movements she made when she heard something others didn't, her hunter's instincts coming as naturally to her as breathing did to Zagreus.

"You never describe yourself in such detail," Kleos said, on Zagreus' fourth night there. The next day, he would depart from the forest and make for the port where there *Bullhorn* would come in.

"I told you what I look like," Zagreus said.

"You said you are a silly looking little man, and I fail to believe that is true."

"Well, believe whatever you want, I told you what is honest."

"Not in anywhere near as much detail as I would require to picture how you look. But I will contend myself with imagining a silly looking little man."

Zagreus laughed, liking Kleos' sharp tongue as much as he had when they'd first met. "You know as much about what I look like as I know of what you look like," he reminded him.

"That is decidedly unfair. I don't know what I look like. I could be extremely handsome, Zagreus, did you ever think of that?"

He had, especially when Kleos' voice sounded like this, low in a way that dipped into sultry. It made him shift in his bed. Gods, it'd been too long since he'd had a night alone.

"Kleos," Zagreus asked. "When you do your, ah, meditation and, um. Existential pondering, do you still hear what is around you?"

"Yes. My auditory functionality doesn't turn off when I'm not thinking about it."

"I see."

Zagreus had not been able to fully ignore a lingering heat, an urge to fulfill his body's needs in a way that he'd taken for granted while he was back home in that big, lonely House in his big, lonely room. It had been easy to forget about while he was sleeping off the fright of his life aboard the *Styx* or falling into bed exhausted after his day on *Asphodel*, but *Elysium* had proven restful enough that Zagreus' body and mind recuperated.

His libido had also recuperated.

"Why, was there something you wanted to say without my receivers listening in?" Kleos asked, in a lilting tease.

"Possibly."

"Elaborate."

"I might want to get off, Kleos, did you think of that?"

"In these past few moments, I have been thinking of nothing but. All these beautiful women around and you can't have any of them, is that what's doing it for you?"

Not in the slightest.

"I am not only interested in women."

"Well, there are no men around here."

Zagreus' heart pounded so forcefully that it constricted his throat. For a moment, he couldn't get words through his windpipe. Then, he finally eked out, "there's you, isn't there?" He instantly regretted it, embarrassment flooding him, his whole body hot with a flush.

"Is that so? Zagreus, I am hardly a man."

"Yes, but when you say my name like that..."

"I am not a man, I'm simply—"

"I know what you are," Zagreus said, before Kleos could say his line about his resemblance to a pastry Zagreus had never actually eaten. "I am holding you, of course I know what you are." Kleos was in his usual position on Zagreus' chest. He'd gotten used to the weight of him there while he slept.

"And?"

"And I still *want* you." He swallowed. "And I want you to want me."

"I hardly have the capacity for that sort of desire," Kleos said. *"I have no body with which to feel it. I am detached completely from the concept of arousal, I can't even feel your hands on me. But I can feel that you are breathing harder."*

The rise and fall of his chest, registering on Kleos' motion sensors. "I am," Zagreus said. "Are you saying you don't want—because I'll respect that, of course. Of course I'll not. Yeah."

"To be terribly honest, I don't know what you intend to do."

"I just want to—touch myself. While you're—yeah. While you're talking to me." He blew out a sigh. "Never mind. It feels quite selfish, actually, especially knowing I can't please you in the same way."

"You cannot. But neither can anyone else. I don't possess the nerve endings required for climax. But that doesn't mean I'd get nothing out of the experience, I imagine."

"What do you imagine you'd get out of the experience?" Zagreus asked.

"I like the knowledge that I'm provoking you in such a way... to be honest, I didn't think I had the ability to affect these kinds of feelings in anybody. It was something outside my peripheral. The concept that someone might be attracted to me—it never entered my processes."

"So I'm satisfying your curiosity?"

"That is a correct way to put it, yes. I apologize if that feels unromantic."

This, he could do. It wasn't solely self-centered. "You know, I've slept with somebody for that reason before. Mutual satisfaction of curiosity."

"Do you normally tell new lovers of your past conquests?"

He snorted a laugh. "I don't know if you'd consider it a *conquest*. Certainly neither he nor I felt we were conquering anything but our own magnificent awkwardness. And even that came back in full force after we were done." They'd just wanted to learn what it was like. Zagreus had been more thoroughly educated later on, but of course his relationship with Megaera crashed and burned.

"Well, then. I believe you're too fully dressed if you want to satisfy your current desires," Kleos said.

"I am curious—how much do you know about this? Your memory is blank, so it's not as if you have experience." Zagreus closed his eyes, letting his awareness fade only to Kleos' voice and the feelings it evoked within him.

"I understand enough about human sexuality that I must have had some experience at some point. Why?"

"I wan't sure if you understand what I am doing."

"Don't worry about that."

"Well, alright. I'm not bothering with undressing, though."

“I suppose what you are wearing must permit that.”

“Do you want to know what I’m wearing?”

“If you won’t describe to me what your face looks like, I will accept this.”

“Well, it’s not exciting. I only have leggings on. So it’s—I can just put my hand—yeah.”

“I see.”

“Mm…”

“Well, I do not see, but I understand.”

“Ha! Okay. Kleos, please keep talking, I—“

“You’re moving around quite a lot, aren’t you? I feel you shifting underneath me. Tell me—how are you touching yourself?”

“Just my fingers. On my clit.”

“You don’t prefer penetration?”

“I can do without it, especially—it’s been a while, I’m sensitive.”

“But you don’t dislike it.”

“No, it just makes my wrist sore eventually, you know? Mm, fuck, that feels good.”

“Pity I don’t remember what I looked like, and thus have no idea what sort of body I was in possession of. It makes it difficult for me to describe how I would take you.”

“Nngh!”

“You are imagining me taking you, yes?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Of course you are. Well, I could certainly take pressure off your wrist if I had my own fingers to stuff you full with.”

“Fuck, Kleos. I’m—haha—I’m wet enough that you could. No problem.”

“Are you?”

“Agh, yeah, there’s—it’s kind of embarrassing how much I’m—just keep talking, before I say something stupid.”

“Hmmm. I don’t think you could say anything I wouldn’t want to hear, at present. Zagreus.”

“Yeah?”

“Is your other hand on me?”

“Oh. Yes, it is.”

“I can feel it. You’re warm.”

“Sorry.”

“Why apologize? Knowing I’m getting you heated is the pinnacle of my half-baked existence right now.”

“Don’t say that, Kleos.”

“Why? You don’t think I should find arousing you to be an accomplishment? You don’t think I should relish the fact that I am capable of making you feel this? This is the most powerful I’ve felt in all I can remember.”

“Ah... hah, yeah, okay.”

“Are you close? You’re moving a lot again.”

“Yes, Kleos, I’m so—ah! So close.”

“You really were pent up, yes? Poor boy.”

“Yeah. Needed this. Needed you.”

“Ha! You didn’t need me—if I stopped talking right now, you’d still come.”

“No no no—I do need you, Kleos, don’t stop—you’re making me feel so good, please!”

“Don’t worry, Zagreus, I wasn’t serious. I’m sorry, dear, don’t cry. Tell me how to make you come. Gods—you’re so wet I can hear it.”

“Ngh!”

“Tell me what you need, beautiful. You sound so lovely—“

“Kleos!”

“—there’s a good boy.”

“Oh fuck, oh fuck.”

“Zagreus, come for me.”

“Mm!”

Zagreus clapped a hand over his mouth so his voice didn’t carry all the way down to the others, his hips jerking as he rode out his orgasm with Kleos a noticeable weight on his chest and a warm voice whispering sweetness and profanity in equal measure into his ears.

His breath came in ungainly heaving motions, Kleos’ little bronze body rising and falling in the center of Zagreus’ chest, over his pounding heart.

“Fuck,” Zagreus said, pulling a dampened hand from between his leggings. He’d have to get up extra early to take a trip to the waterfall where the nymphs showered and washed their clothes. “Thank you.”

“I should be the one thanking you, I think,” Kleos said.

“Why? It’s not like that was as reciprocal as I like sex to be.”

“On the contrary. For a moment, I felt quite...alive.”

— — —

Despite his plans, Zagreus didn't manage to wake early. In fact, he slept through breakfast. There wasn't anybody at the spring while he was washing, at least, and for that he was thankful. Kleos, who still wasn't certain whether he was waterproof, sat in his usual place in Zagreus' jacket, over on the rocks and out of range of the spray, but Zagreus could still hear him through the comms.

"Knowing you're naked over there is really making me wish I had eyes."

Zagreus, who was sticking his head under the waterfall to rinse his hair, jerked his head the wrong direction and got a mouthful of water for his troubles. He sputtered, spitting out river water.

"Are you always this awkward after you have sex with somebody?" Kleos sounded amused.

Zagreus laughed as he stepped out of the river and grabbed a towel, scrubbing it through his hair. "You know what, actually, yeah. I think my past lovers could both confirm that."

"Both?"

"Yes?"

"Your experience is not as extensive as I presumed."

"I'm sorry, did you presume there were a lot of eligible partners in Tartarus?" Zagreus flung his wet clothes over the line that the nymphs had hung to dry their things, and plucked the ones he'd washed yesterday off. He'd been rotating back and forth between his two sets of clothes, and would have to hope the ones he'd washed this morning dried before he had to go. This one, with black leggings and a black sleeveless turtleneck beneath his chiton,

was warmer, which he'd need once he left the atmosphere and was sailing through Aegean space. Artificial atmo only did so much.

"Come to think of it, no," said Kleos. "I should probably be more surprised that we're not discussing whether whatever we did last night relieved you of your virginity."

"Hey, now."

"You talk to yourself a lot."

Zagreus jumped, then relaxed once he realized it was just Dahlia, skipping up the path. "I'm talking to my communicator," he said, pointing to his earring.

She gave him a funny look. "Those aren't supposed to work here."

"Uh, mine's special?" It was probably because he was communicating with someone who was in his jacket pocket. His jacket which Dahlia was creeping toward with her nosy little hands outstretched. Zagreus swept it up and put it on, and she pouted.

"Lady Artemis said she wants to see you before you go," she said. "You're probably in trouble. You slept way too late."

"I had a busy night," he said.

"Ah." she gave a wise nod, which ruffled her leaves. They were in her face again. Zagreus discovered he'd picked up the urge to tie them out of her face. "Kissing someone, probably."

"What? No. I wasn't—no."

Kleos was having a chuckle again. *"I suppose you're not lying to her."*

"That's what adults do late at night," she said. "That's what Callisto and Lady Artemis do."

Zagreus had been beginning to suspect as much. He also really didn't want Dahlia spreading rumors that might make his cousin want to murder him. "No. I'm not involved with any women right now—just with another man."

"Where did you find one of those?" Dahlia asked him, trotting behind him as he headed toward Artemis' grove at the back of the complex.

"Space," he answered.

"*Your pocket*," said Kleos. He was developing a bad habit of butting in while Zagreus was talking to someone and couldn't answer him.

"I'm gonna go to space one day," Dahlia told him. "I'll ride a deer there."

"I don't know if deer go to—"

"Zagreus. Dahlia, please go." This was Artemis' greeting. Dahlia seemed undeterred by her coldness, and rushed over to give her a hug before leaving. Artemis patted her on the head.

Zagreus stood, waiting for her decree. While among her nymphs, Artemis seemed like just another one of them, always with Callisto's arm around her or one of them braiding her hair. While he was alone with her, Artemis had the air of a goddess. Zagreus was constantly worried he had trodden upon her and her ladies' sanctuary.

"I wanted to give you something before you leave," she said.

He had expected a gift from her. She handed him an amulet shaped like an arrow's head, silver with jade inlay running in channels down to the point in a similar pattern to how the stream in her grove ran down the rocks.

"This token is a sign that you have the favor of an Olympian," she said. "I cannot do more to protect you, because I must protect my forest above all, but my power and the power of my warriors is known well enough that anyone who wants to do you harm will think twice if they see that I favor you."

"Thank you," Zagreus said, bowing his head and allowing her to fasten the clasp around his neck. "It was kind enough for you to allow me to stay among your community, and I greatly appreciate anything that will help me on my journey."

She shrugged. "I understand what it is like to have a father that I want to run away from. Besides, you have been eager to help us all this week, and kind to my ladies. I could not ask for more from a cousin."

"I thank you doubly for your support."

She gave him a wry little smile, something he'd only ever seen her pass to Callisto. "I'm sorry I mistrusted you so at the beginning. Do you have a moment to eat with me before you go?" She gestured to a round, flat rock that had been laid like a table, with bread and fresh-cooked meat and a basket of fruit.

"Of course," he said.

He hadn't seen her eat with the rest of them before. Naturally, as an Olympian, she did not need sustenance in the same way mortals, or even minor gods like Zagreus did. She was neat about it, skillfully dividing the food onto their plates and pouring him a glass of an orange liquid, which fizzed a little, as if carbonated.

"What is this?" he asked, picking up his glass.

"Nectar." She gave him a funny look. "You've never had it?"

"Nope. We don't really get that in Tartarus." Zagreus tried a taste and found it delightful, sweet and a little bit sour.

She smiled as she watched him try it, but the expression fell from her face quickly. There was something serious she wanted to discuss, Zagreus thought, and he set down his glass.

"You must understand, the reason for my hesitancy in trusting men... it runs deep." She shook her head. "Some time ago, my *father*, of all people, came

to my forest while I was away. Lord Zeus is a shapeshifter, and he took on my guise. He approached Callisto. There was some rumor going around the planet that he slept with her and they had a son." She rolled her eyes. "That's not true. She recognized him—or at least, she recognized that it was not me. She stalled him until I arrived, and I had to drive him out of my home while he told me it was all in good fun."

The very idea of this struck Zagreus at his heart. "I'm so sorry, Artemis. I took your actions toward me as overprotectiveness, but I see now that you were being quite reasonable."

She picked at the bread she was holding, breaking off crumbs of it which the birds that fluttered around her at all times dropped onto the table to peck at. "You are the first of the gods to tell me this was reasonable. I cut ties with Olympus completely, and they act as if I did it over some petty squabble. It's why I block extraplanetary communications here."

"Seems sensible."

Her somber mood slightly lifted, she picked up a little bowl of honey and drizzled it over her fruit, then handed it to Zagreus so he could do the same. "And *that* is why I'm surprised to hear people note you talking into a communicator."

He spilled a little too much honey and had to lick it off his fingertips. "I'm not getting around your blockages, I swear," he said. "I can't... I can't really tell you more than that. It involves someone else's privacy, and I'm bound by honor not to break that."

And that someone else was being very quiet at the moment.

"I know you're not getting around my blockages. It is the very heart of the forest that silences calls, you wouldn't be able to subvert it." She gave a slow nod. "You are an honorable man. I can only hope Father and our other relatives do not take advantage of your good heart. Now, hurry up and eat. You'll need it on your journey today."

The somber mood broken, Zagreus went about his breakfast (brunch?) while asking Artemis the names of all her birds.

— — —

When Zagreus left the forest, guided by Callisto, he heard the static-click of Kleos' comm link connecting.

"I thank you for keeping my confidence," he said, and Zagreus patted his breast pocket, even though Kleos couldn't feel him.

6. the Bullhorn pt. 1

Summary for the Chapter:

Zagreus meets the illustrious captain and first mate of the Bullhorn, and then plots his escape from Elysium.

Notes for the Chapter:

Theseus and Asterius are in the HOUSE! Which means one more chapter til PZA gets their A!!!

After a week in the woods, Elysium's spaceport felt even more overwhelming than it had the first time.

This was not the everyday pastoral hecticness Zagreus had seen when he was helping unload the *Scamandrios*, but true chaos: shouting and scrambling, an enormous crowd gathered and people pushing through it to see the spectacle that was the *Bullhorn*, silhouetted against the setting sun.

She was an enormous ship, and looked brand new. Her warm wooden planks were polished to a brilliant shine, and every edge was gilded. Her sails had the usual solar array, but they were backed in a bright, eye-watering pink, and the flag that fluttered proudly from the tallest mast was aquamarine, with a symbol that looked like, appropriately, a bull's horns. The gangplank was down, and there was a man standing on it, waving to the crowd, wearing a crisp blue uniform with magenta accents. Laurels like the ones Zagreus had left behind glittered on his head, completing a truly ostentatious look.

As Zagreus drew closer, he could hear him shouting over the crowd. "...another truly impressive and massively successful voyage! We apprehended two ships, you see, our cannons tearing through their hulls and leaving them stranded in space, captured and brought here to become rehabilitated members of society instead of the ruffians and brigands they once were!"

Zagreus weaved through the crowd, trying to get closer, not sure what he would say once he reached the gangplank.

"While working the fields here in Elysium, they will learn to contribute rather than pillage, give back to their community rather than steal! Our next mission will be even more of a success! We continue to serve our faithful galaxy, to show you all what myself and my wonderful and talented crew can accomplish!"

He seemed as if he was going to go on, but the crowd started to back away and the captain was forced to step off the gangplank as his crew brought several prisoners, manacled together, to turn over to the Elysian authorities. On ground level, the captain looked less intimidating, as he was only around Zagreus' height. The man—the *creature*—leading the prisoners was much more imposing, almost twice Zagreus' size, with a bull's head and broad shoulders, wearing the same uniform and laurel as the captain but looking formidable instead of formal.

Zagreus addressed the captain instead of the bull-man, both because the bull-man seemed busy and the captain seemed less terrifying. "Excuse me, sir," he said, no reason not to start things off politely, after all. "I'm an admirer of your work, and I wanted to inquire about a position among your crew on your next voyage."

Zagreus was as cordial as he could possibly manage, and yet the captain still looked at him like he was less than garbage. "We have no need of blackguards like yourself," he said haughtily, taking a step back and folding his hands behind his back as if he didn't want to risk Zagreus getting dirt on his uniform.

"But—"

"The crew of the mighty *Bullhorn* is made up of the finest in the galaxy. Begone, filth."

"*What a prick*," Kleos muttered. Zagreus privately concurred.

"Sir, I would only need to remain with you until you next reach Olympus. I am traveling to find my family," Zagreus continued, finding it harder and harder to be deferential.

One golden, over-manicured eyebrow raised. "Look upon this vessel, fiend. Does she look like a passenger transport?"

"Well, no, but I—"

"As I thought. Now, crawl back into whatever hole you came from before I must have Asterius remove you." He shouldered past Zagreus with a flick of his fuschia cape directly into Zag's face. It carried with it the scent of heavily rose-scented cologne.

Zagreus, left fuming, remembered the pinched look on Artemis' face as she said she disliked the *Bullhorn's* captain.

'Dislike' seemed like too simple a word.

"Holy fuck, I hate him," Zagreus said.

"*I agree,*" said Kleos.

The crowd followed the captain, who was still lauding his ship, and then requesting the best establishment in Elysium to stay the night. "We will set off in the morning!" he shouted in the distance, "after we have experienced all the delights and wonders this quaint planet has to offer!"

Why they had to stay a night, Zagreus had no clue. It wasn't as if their ship was unequipped to travel through the blackness of space and needed dawn's light to guide them.

But it gave Zagreus a chance.

"We're sneaking on," he told Kleos.

"*Oh, perfect, I'm wonderful at stealth.*"

— — —

They meandered around the port, waiting until the crowd thinned and only the night shift workers were around. In the meantime, Zagreus stocked up on supplies using some of the cash he'd stolen from his father's house that he'd been trying to save in order to stretch it to Olympus. He wasn't sure how long it would take to reach Olympus, exactly, or what sort of hiding place he might find aboard the bowels of the *Bullhorn*, so most of these supplies ended up being the sort of nutrient-packed pastes and drinks that he was used to from back home. Nothing tasty in the way of travel rations, but they'd keep him from starving for several weeks, if he needed. Being the son of a god meant he could survive longer without food.

Before he made his way onboard the *Bullhorn*, he told Kleos he would need the utmost quiet in order to concentrate. Kleos obliged, and promised only to speak up in an emergency. Zagreus fastened his jacket shut to keep Kleos secure against his chest, and made his way to the ship.

The *Bullhorn* was only staying a night, so it wasn't grounded, and the hum of the machinery keeping the vessel hovering drowned out Zagreus' footsteps as he approached, assessing the ship.

The gangplank was up, but there were tethers keeping her anchored. Great length of wire rope like those that held up a suspension bridge were magnetized to the docking ports on the bottom of the ship. Zagreus could scale the anchors instead of using his rocket boots for most of the climb, thus avoiding the light that had assumedly alerted Hermes and Charon to his presence when he tried to board their vessel.

He put on his gloves to make the climb, the metal still slippery despite the low-level magnetic charge in the palms. He had to dig his fingertips in, pulling himself up with upper body strength alone, because he couldn't get a grip on the cables with his boots. It was a slow, painful climb, the exterior of the *Bullhorn* too sleek for Zagreus to find any purchase on the ship itself, unlike the Styx, which had all manner of protrusion.

He was sweating through his under-layer by the time he made it to the end of the tether, and his arms shook, his biceps cramping with the strain. There was a series of portholes studding the side of the ship, and Zagreus craned his head, looking for an open one to try to leap for.

They were all shut.

The windows would be reinforced glass, too thick for him to break through, and besides, anything broken would arouse suspicion and delay takeoff. His boots would have enough force to let him leap up onto the deck, but if anyone was on there, he was fucked. They were bright and a little noisy and he'd probably land ungracefully.

But it was either that or hang here until his arms gave out, so he let his left arm go, knocked his wrist against the cable twice to activate the button for his boots on his wristband, and cringed as the noisy ignition split the relatively peaceful night and flames lit up the dark.

In a moment, he'd launched himself up and over the rail of the ship and onto the deck. He flipped the switch off as soon as he landed, so his boots wouldn't leave scorch marks on the wood, and actually managed not to drop in a heap, although there was a thump as his feet hit the deck and he tucked and rolled into his landing.

He froze, barely breathing, looking around the deck. Empty. Thank the gods.

There was grating on the floor that showed the lower deck, and Zagreus peered through it, his implant sensing no movement. If there was anyone in the belly of the ship, they were on the lowest decks, or unmoving. Zagreus remained plastered to the wall as he made his way down the narrow stairway and below-deck, trying to roll each step as quietly as possible, which was a challenge when you were wearing heavy rocket boots.

A storage space or a little-used maintenance hall would be ideal, he thought, somewhere he could see but not be seen, hear but not be heard.

He took another set of stairs down, and then a ladder, and found his hiding place in a crawlspace just below the lowest deck. It was truly the belly of the ship, and if there were any cracks in the insular field it would be cold as hell down there, but Zagreus was used to the chill of hell. It was tight, but if the ship was quiet enough in the off-shifts, Zag would be able to sneak out and use the restroom that was nearby, stretch out a little bit, maybe.

There was a few scant inches of space between his nose and the roof of the crawlspace before him. This wasn't going to be fun, but it was going to be worth it.

It had to be.

— — —

Zagreus estimated about an hour had gone by since he'd heard the ship take off. They were out in the expanse of space somewhere, and Zagreus was praying the *Bullhorn* was going to head straight for Olympus without stopping to fight more pirates on the way. A few times, he'd heard footsteps over his head, but he'd been able to settle into relative comfort, doing his best to fall asleep so that he could keep his circadian rhythms opposite that of the waking shifts on the ship.

He must have managed a deeper sleep than he thought he would, because when he opened his eyes to find somebody peeling back the crawlspace hatch, his first thought was 'this must be a dream'.

"What's happening?" asked Kleos, who must have heard the grating scrape of it.

Zagreus, frozen in terror where he lay, didn't answer.

He only had a fraction of a second to wonder who was standing on the other side of the door.

"A- *ha!* Ho there, fiend, whatever did you think you were going to achieve, sneaking aboard our vessel in such a manner?"

The door was flung aside to reveal the tailored-uniform-covered legs of the captain of the *Bullhorn*, who was standing with one foot on either side of the crawlspace hatch. This was possibly the worst wakeup call Zagreus had ever had. He didn't respond, only cringed. Kleos was sighing in his ear.

"Did you not think a state-of-the-art vessel such as the *Bullhorn* would possess sensors with the capacity to notice you before we even got off the

ground?" he shouted. The lower deck was small enough that it didn't really require shouting, even with the engines running off on the opposite end.

"Then why didn't you notice me before you left Elysium?" Zagreus asked, sitting up, trying to hide that he was still blinking sleep from his eyes.

"How *DARE* you—!"

"We did," said the first mate, who was crouched down so his enormous horns didn't scrape along the ceiling. "The captain thought it was a sensor error."

"Indeed. I didn't think anyone would be *idiotic* enough to board our ship." The captain crossed his arms. Zagreus couldn't stand up, or he'd get way closer to the captain's thighs than he wanted to be. "We will have no choice but to eject you from this vessel and send you spiraling into the dark expanses of space."

"*What?*" Zagreus gasped, a sentiment which Kleos simultaneously echoed. He decided he ought to stop stowing away. First Charon threatening to eat him, now this.

"Captain," said the bull-man.

"You will drift endlessly, your frozen corpse a reminder to any who would cross us!" the captain planted his boot in the middle of Zagreus' chest and shoved, but Zag braced himself and wasn't sent prone.

"Captain."

"The scum of the galaxy, none would ever—"

"*Theseus*," the bull-man implored, finally addressing the captain by name.

"Yes, Asterius, what?" he said, sounding very ruffled about being halted mid-tirade. He dropped his foot from Zagreus' person, thankfully. Zag was just glad he'd not planted his toe right on Kleos.

"It is against protocol to space a stowaway," said Asterius.

"But it is so *egregious*," Theseus said. "A crime of the worst degree!" He was sounding whinier and whinier.

"Protocol states that a stowaway should be imprisoned and given trial once we reach port, or else set to work—"

"I know what protocol states," he snapped. "Just give me a moment to put the fear of Zeus into him."

"And what gives you the right?" Zagreus asked.

Theseus' face was going bright red with fury, and it was kind of funny, and would have been even funnier if he wasn't threatening to shoot Zag out into space. "How *dare* you! I am Captain Theseus, First Officer of the Olympian Fleet! I am a son of Poseidon!" (Oh, gross, he was *related* to Zag.) "I am—I am—!"

"A *magnificent asshole*," Kleos filled in, which made Zagreus snigger.

"Asterius, he *laughs* in the face of my authority!"

"Captain, just put him in the brig," said Asterius, with a very bovine snort.

"Absolutely not. We have no room for cowardly criminals who cannot contribute to our worthwhile efforts!" Theseus finally moved out of the way and let Zagreus climb out of the crawlspace. "Send him to work with the engineer, down here in the belly of the ship where I cannot see him." He gave an offhand wave. "See what that blasted cyborg wants to do with him, I care not."

"Yes, captain," said Asterius.

Theseus turned with a flourish of his cape and walked away, his heels clicking on the floors of the deck, and Zagreus watched him scramble up the ladder and out. Above them, Zagreus could hear Theseus stomping around and roaring at the crew. Seriously, what were they paying people to tolerate this?

Asterius' head swung around, his horns coming very close to the ceiling, but not quite scraping it. He was quite aware of his size.

"Well," he said, frowning at Zagreus. "Best introduce yourself to your fate, then."

7. the Bullhorn pt. 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Zagreus meets the engineer of the Bullhorn, a particularly magnetic man by the name of Achilles.

Asterius pointed Zagreus toward the stern, where the engines were. *'You'll know it when you see it,'* he'd said. It became darker the further he went back, mostly because Zagreus could not find the lightswitches and didn't waste time trying. He could see well enough with his implant. He was just glad Asterius had sent him on his way alone, because even though Asterius had been the less monstrous of the two, having him looming behind would fill Zagreus with even more dread than he already possessed.

There was something creepy about this part of the ship. Maybe the darkness, maybe the creak of the inner workings like a metal digestive tract moving along and gurgling as it went.

On a door at the very back of the ship, illuminated by a single amber lightbulb, was a placard reading 'ENGINEERING'. Well. He knew it when he saw it.

Zagreus knocked, his other hand over his chest to feel the familiar shape of Kleos in his pocket. Kleos had, in the severity of the situation, been rather quiet, and Zagreus wanted a reminder he was there.

The voice from the other side of the door was a metallic rasp, as if echoing inside a helmet.

"Come in."

Zagreus opened the door to find a dark room, lit by more amber track lights around the perimeter of the ceiling and the floor.

His fate, Zagreus discovered, was head and shoulders taller than him and in possession of glowing red eyes. This should not have been particularly

intimidating, given Zagreus' own glowing red eye, but it resembled his father too much for comfort. There was a sound like metal brushing against metal as the engineer rose to full looming height, whirring gleams of gold where he should have had limbs. *That blasted cyborg*, Theseus had called him.

He reached toward Zagreus' face, with a hand that looked like a half a dozen blades, and Zagreus flinched, drawing both hands to his chest, covering Kleos, tucking his chin down—

An electric hum filled the room as an overhead lightbulb flickered and came on.

Oh.

The lightswitch was behind Zagreus' head.

The glowing red eyes weren't eyes, in fact, but the lights on either side of a welding mask the engineer was wearing, and the blades on his arm weren't blades, but finely articulated prosthetic fingers, slim and brilliant gold in the warm light.

He lifted the welding mask, pulling it off to reveal a very human-looking face. High cheekbones, a slim jawline, a flat nose, hooded eyes with deep furrows beneath. "Yes?" he asked, his voice no longer distorted by the mask.

Zagreus was lost for breath, because it all added up to an unexpectedly handsome picture.

"Did the captain send you?" the engineer guessed, and Zagreus nodded.

"I. Um. Sort of stowed away? And so he sent me to you. I'm to assist you, sir."

There was a smile on his face which made him look younger, and he shook his head, loosing a few strands of hair that shone as golden as his prosthetics did. He smoothed it back with his opposite hand, and his ears,

which were slightly pointed at the tips, flicked a little. "Well, you're a brave one, aren't you? Few would be so fearless or so foolish as to stow away aboard the *Bullhorn*."

"Sounds correct," said Zagreus, who was both brave and foolish. "I'm Zagreus. And, um, I'm sorry you're stuck with me."

"Don't worry," he said. "I've been asking Theseus for an assistant for years. Now, help me with these power coils?" He gestured at them, and Zagreus wasn't sure what he was meant to do with it.

He stepped closer anyways, hoping the engineer would give him further instruction. "Sure, yes, of course. But, uh, before I do that—could I have your name?"

"Gods, I spend too much time around machines and not people," he sighed. "It's Achilles."

"Nice to meet you, then, Achilles," Zagreus said.

— — —

Working with Achilles was enjoyable, for all its challenges. Theseus could have simply agreed to Zagreus' request to join their crew and he would have assisted Achilles without complaint (working as a prisoner, though, meant Theseus didn't have to pay him). It was hard work, of course, and Achilles had Zagreus scampering all around the ship to pick up supplies or test power, fetching him tools so he could keep the massive solar converter at the back of the ship running smoothly.

It was active work, for both his body and his mind, which Zagreus appreciated. He learned quickly but he still often made mistakes, which Achilles took in stride, understanding that his profession took more than a few hours' training to understand. He was content to let Zagreus do the menial labor, and to take on most of the detailed work himself.

That arm of his did the work of two men, anyhow.

It was fascinating to watch him work. The arm wasn't just a hand—the forearm piece was a wide compartment which held any number of tools and instruments that he needed for his work, which could be rotated out for his fingers. The tech itself was beautiful, highly decorative for somebody in his position. It wasn't *made* of gold, that would be impractical, but it was gilded, and there were diamond-shaped embossed patterns along it with bright green gems inlaid. His leg was similarly decorated but not quite as multi-functional. From the knee down, it was a singular curved piece of steel, which had some flexibility to it, and allowed him to walk with an even gait. Zagreus supposed it wouldn't be as helpful to have a screwdriver for a leg.

Zagreus also liked to watch the focus in his eyes, the quick and competent way his hands moved, the tilt of his head that showed off an elegant neck mottled with branching scars that originated from the point on his shoulder at which his prosthetic was attached. His hair, swept off the back of his neck and tied firmly into a knot there, was just as golden as his limbs.

"Zagreus," he said eventually, startling Zagreus out of a reverie that mostly revolved around the way Achilles moved so confidently while he worked, like he could do it with his eyes closed. "Have you eaten?"

He'd been too distracted to remember such things as hunger. "No," he answered truthfully. "To be honest I'm not sure where the kitchen is."

"Then I'll show you," Achilles said, pulling up the goggles he'd been wearing while doing *something* to all the piping Zagreus didn't understand. Zagreus noted that his eyes, beneath, were a warm amber color. He had pressure marks from the goggles. Zagreus wanted to run his thumbs over those pink lines, smooth them out a bit.

Achilles stood, and Zag was reminded that Achilles was a good bit taller than him, and he put a hand on Zag's shoulder, steering him, as if Zag had forgotten where the door was.

To be fair, in his focus on Achilles, he had forgotten about most things. Zagreus let him lead.

Zagreus was surprised to find a shade working the kitchen.

It was a Tartarus model, through and through, down to the particular color of green oxidation on its metal, which clashed with the *Bullhorn's* blue and pink motifs. The shade couldn't speak more than just to emote, and Zagreus didn't have a chance to try retuning to talk to them (nor did he want to break his connection to Kleos, whether or not his companion had been mostly silent while he worked with Achilles).

Zagreus knew he was staring when Achilles said, "you've never been on an Olympian-chartered vessel, have you, lad?"

"No," Zagreus said, as they took their trays of food to the table. The meal was some kind of stew that had a lot of vegetables, thanks to the recent stop in Elysium. "I've never seen a shade..." *'Outside Tartarus,'* his brain almost supplied, until he remembered he was not supposed to be from Tartarus. He let the end of his sentence hang there. Most people would never have seen a shade, so this wasn't an odd place to leave off. Probably.

Achilles gave a steady nod, looking down at his own bowl. He was removing all of the onions and setting them to the side. Zagreus was sure that wasn't how you were supposed to eat it, but he said nothing, just glad he wasn't going to have to subsist on the rations he'd stowed in his bag. "Tartarus supplies Olympus with shades for menial tasks. There are many in the production facilities that make these ships. They are more reliable than robots and do not require the same sort of care that mortal employees would. In return, Olympus need only supply them with a power source they can run on—and pay a fee to Lord Hades, of course."

Zagreus was not surprised that Olympus would ask for something like this, but he was surprised that his father allowed it. He buttoned his natural reaction closed, however. Giving Achilles his real thoughts would betray that he knew more than he should. "Shades are... people, though, right? They're souls?"

Achilles stopped his task of sorting one particular vegetable out of his food, looked at Zagreus, and smiled. "Not many still believe that," he said. "I've known many who have gone to Tartarus, but it's not common practice

anymore to offer the gods enough to be able to communicate with your dead. It's more of a graveyard than an afterlife."

Didn't Zag know it.

"I'm glad one of them is getting a second chance, then," he said, although he wasn't entirely certain he believed himself. He ate the rest of his meal in relative quiet, sneaking occasional glances at Achilles.

— — —

Zagreus hadn't been sure where he was going to sleep, exactly, but Achilles offered him one of the bunks in Engineering. There were two, one on either side of the engine room, and it was noisy as hell down there, but having his own room with a bed and a separate attached bathroom was more than Zag expected.

Since Achilles had spent so long without an assistant or a second engineer, he'd been using this room as additional storage. Zagreus helped him move boxes out into the main space of engineering, but paused when he looked past the doorframe to catch sight of one of the strangest things he'd seen yet.

"What is that?" he asked. It looked at first like a dead body, then a suit of armor, then something like Achilles' arm and leg, but an entire person.

"It's a project of mine," Achilles said, scooping it into his arms and making Zag's stomach swoop when he realized how easily Achilles could carry *him*. "An android."

Zagreus had seen androids before—specifically the androids that shades inhabited. Daedalus himself didn't look as finely crafted as this model, though. Most androids were like the chef on the ship, spindly limbs, motion limited to purposeful, indelicate movements, no defining features, just a screen for a face.

When Zagreus looked closer, he realized his estimation of a suit of armor had been partially correct. The android had been made from a repurposed

set—a breastplate as its main body, greaves encasing its legs, pauldrons over its shoulder joints. In between these were smooth plates of steel that had been measured to perfection, leaving the body relatively human-sized. It would probably be of a height with Achilles if it stood.

"Does it work?" Zagreus asked. "I mean, will it?" It probably didn't work in its current state. There was no faceplate, just a mess of mechanical gore and wires spilling out its head, and another such wound in its chest, a perfectly circular opening from which its robot organs spewed. It looked creepy as hell, but Zagreus was drawn to creepy.

"I don't know, really," Achilles sighed, setting it slumped atop a pile of boxes. "He's been a difficult project. A labor of love, you could say. He's missing some pieces. Legs and arms aren't wired properly. I need to rework a lot of him." He ran his fingers over the wires snaking out of the chest cavity.

'Him'. It was strange to hear somebody refer to an artificial shell with personal pronouns.

"This man really has been lonely," Kleos piped up, and Zagreus concurred.

"Your room should be sorted then, lad," Achilles said, interrupting any of Zag's musing.

"Thanks, sir. When should I wake for the morning shift?"

"You can assist me whenever you naturally wake, don't worry," Achilles said. "I imagine your day has been rather hectic. You may need more sleep than usual."

Or, he may lay awake thinking of Achilles.

"Thank you, then. Goodnight," Zagreus said, retreating to his room.

There was barely enough space to turn around in here, but it looked comfortable enough. There was a shelf where he could put his boots, and a hook for his bag. After stripping to just his leggings, Zagreus flopped onto

the bed, pulling Kleos out of his pocket and putting him in his customary place on Zagreus' chest.

"*What a day, hm?*" Kleos said.

"You were quiet for most of it," Zagreus replied.

"*I'll admit, I was... worried. I am glad they didn't eject you into space.*"

"Yeah, that probably wouldn't be very good for you, either."

"*You're taking me to be destroyed anyway.*"

Zagreus clapped a hand to Kleos' face, holding him tighter to his chest. "I absolutely am not. Do you really think—after all we've been through? After you've seen how Olympus treats shades? You know that chef wasn't really getting enough power to keep him running, he couldn't speak."

Kleos made a soft, sad laugh. "*I should have known you would change your mind on that. Your heart is too good for the world it's in, Zagreus.*"

"I beg to differ, the world just needs to adjust itself to my standards," Zagreus said, only half a joke. He stretched out his legs, found his feet almost touched the opposite wall of his room. He wondered how Achilles fit in his bed in the mirroring room. This ship was built like it should have two engineers, but Achilles was working alone.

"*Tell me about the people here,*" Kleos said, regaining some of his easy demeanor. "*Tell me of Achilles.*"

"I mean... what do you want to know? He's got a metal arm and leg. Theseus called him a cyborg, but I'm not entirely sure what's the difference between that and a person who has prosthetics." Zagreus knew what Kleos was requesting: a description like those Zagreus gave of Artemis and her ladies, specific features, things Kleos could picture when Zagreus mentioned their names. He wasn't quite sure how to describe Achilles. "He's, uh, tall. Blond. He has pointy ears, which is kind of weird."

"*He's handsome, isn't he?*"

"What makes you say that?" Zagreus asked. "Also, yeah. Sure. He's handsome."

Kleos laughed. *"I just had a feeling, based on how you spoke to him."*

"Hush, you."

"You know, until now, the only person I'd heard you so thoroughly refuse to describe was yourself. I surmise you're handsome, too."

Zagreus hoped the noise of the engine was enough to prevent Achilles from hearing the startled bark of a laugh he let out. "Gods, you are far too perceptive for a brain in a box, Kleos."

"What a fanciful way of putting it. Now. Tell me what he looks like."

"Can I tell you what the android looks like instead?" he asked.

Kleos sighed at length. *"Hmm. If you must not tell me about this attractive man, the android does intrigue."*

Thank the gods for that.

8. the Bullhorn pt. 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Zagreus gets to know Achilles and, naturally, starts falling for him.

Notes for the Chapter:

It's been a while and I'm glad to be back! welcome to the chapter where KISSINGS HAPPEN

Things slowed down after the first few days of their journey. Achilles' work primarily took place upon take-off and landing; he would spend the middle of the trip maintaining the vessel and fixing anything that the crew managed to break.

During this lull, he took time to educate Zagreus, showing him what they'd need to do when the ship landed, and how all the basics worked. He was patient, especially considering Zagreus hardly knew which way of a wrench was up. Achilles taught him with calm words and a steady smile, always a compliment when he did something right and never a harsh word when he did something wrong, just a gentle correction.

On his fifth day aboard, Achilles brought him to a berth in the lower part of the ship where the schooners were held. They were designed to look like the *Bullhorn* in miniature, with pink sails and warm wood and gilt edges, but they were of a size that would fit two, maybe three men. There was a small engine on the back which would only run without refueling for a few hours or so, less if they were in deep space and the boat had to generate its own atmosphere. They were typically meant to ferry you back and forth from port while the ship was awaiting docking, but Achilles intended to teach Zag to drive one.

"You can't rely on auto-pilot all the time, lad," he'd said.

Achilles put Zagreus in the pilot seat and sat behind him, leaning forward to point out all the controls, giving him instructions in his usual even tone. The

only thing that kept Zagreus from melting from the proximity to Achilles was the fact that he needed to process what Achilles was saying or he might crash and get them both killed.

Kleos was quiet again, as he tended to be while Zagreus was working with Achilles. He admitted during one of their nightly conversations that Achilles' voice made him feel the closest to sleepy he could at present. There was a restfulness he experienced while Achilles talked, and for a man who didn't often have comfort, this was novel.

(Zag wondered whether Kleos ever felt that restfulness when Zagreus spoke.)

"Are you ready, lad?" Achilles asked Zagreus, his soft voice and his breath in Zagreus' ear making the hair on the back of Zag's neck prickle.

"Yeah," he said, hands on the controls, feet on the appropriate pedals. He consciously loosened his fists on the control sticks—Achilles had told him he didn't need such a tight grip.

"Let's go, then," Achilles said, and the hatch beneath them rolled open, making Zagreus' stomach flip. Achilles nudged him and he hit the switch to disconnect them from the magnetic tether than held the longboats. They were flying free, and Zagreus had the controls.

His first few turns were tentative, big laps around the ship itself. Zagreus rarely saw the main deck, and he enjoyed the refreshingly distant view over it, Theseus at the helm looking particularly tiny, like an egomaniacal speck of dust.

"You're doing well," Achilles said, even when they wobbled a little. When Zagreus' handle on the controls smoothed out, he graduated to, "you can take that turn a little tighter," and, "step on the accelerator a bit more, it can take a little more speed."

By the time Zagreus had his feet under him, so to speak, Achilles was leaned back, relaxed, and enjoying the ride. He wasn't worried Zagreus was

going to crash them, which meant it was high time for Zagreus to try something a little more adventurous.

The engine powered up with a satisfying whir, and Zagreus leaned in to push all the dials he could to maximum. When he stepped on the accelerator and threw the controls forward, they were sent bursting forward in a wild stream of light, rocketing ahead and leaving the *Bullhorn* in their exhaust trails.

Achilles gasped as Zag flipped them into a tight spiral, but then it became laughter, and Achilles thumped forward in his seat, clutching the handrails on either side of Zagreus' waist, his forehead pressed against Zagreus' back for a moment. When they came out of the turn and flew even faster through the galactic expanse, Achilles tipped his head back and howled, wild and abandoned in a way Zagreus didn't expect from such a reserved, focused man.

He laughed along with Achilles, leaning back against him and looking up at the stars that swirled overhead as they accelerated. The whole of space was theirs alone, the stars so close Zagreus could have brushed his fingers through them and stirred them where they hung.

They only had moments, then the low-power indicator light started blinking on his panel, telling Zagreus to head back to the ship lest they risk the whole schooner shutting down.

They pulled into the berth still laughing, and Zagreus' hands shook a little as he reattached the magnetic coils, the aftermath of an adrenaline rush coursing through him. He let go of the tether accidentally, and the schooner tilted forward, sending Achilles tumbling into him.

Achilles would have knocked Zagreus off his feet, but instead, he seized Zag around the waist with one hand, pulling them chest to chest, laughter still edging his mouth.

"Watch yourself, there, lad," he teased.

Zagreus knew he'd gone all pink, with Achilles pressed so close he could smell motor grease and metal, but also the rich scent of the oils Achilles used to keep his fine robotic joints moving. Achilles' hair had come loose in their flight and was falling down around his shoulders and into Zag's face. Without Kleos as a barrier in Zag's pocket, Achilles probably would have been able to feel the frantic pace of Zagreus' heart.

There was nothing Zagreus wanted more than to lean in and kiss the perfect bow of Achilles' lips.

Zagreus inclined his head, his eyes shutting, every fragment of him charged with the energy of this moment. Achilles' breath tickled his cheek. One exhale, then another. Achilles' nose bumped against his. Zagreus tipped his chin forward, his lips in a soft press against the corner of Achilles' mouth. There was a second in which Zagreus thought they might be kissing.

And then Achilles loosened his hold.

Achilles stepped back, re-tethered the boat, cleared his throat of the moment they'd been caught up in. "Good flying out there, Zagreus," he said.

"Achilles—"

He was already stepping free of the schooner, landing as soon as the bay doors closed. "We should turn in, I think."

Zagreus leapt after him. "*Achilles. Can we talk first? If I went too far, you need to tell me. It's okay, I know I'm... Horny. Desperate. A bona fide disaster.*"

Achilles stopped his tracks. He leaned against a barrel, just one of many kegs of unnamed cargo that sat in the *Bullhorn's* hold. He pinched his brow, lowering his head. "Zagreus, I am... messy, when it comes to love."

Zagreus didn't know how to respond, stricken by the way Achilles backed up when he stepped forward. He didn't know what to say, but Achilles, letting his hand fall to his side, continued.

"My heart is consumed by memories of a lost love. It would be unfair to put you through that."

Zagreus stayed on the boat, didn't chase after him. He wanted to know more, he wanted to understand *why*. But Achilles wasn't going to tell him, and Zagreus knew he shouldn't press.

"If you say so, sir," said Zagreus, and it felt hollow out of his throat.

Achilles gave him one final, jerky nod and turned to leave the berth. When Zagreus got back to Engineering, taking his time for once because he didn't want to come across Achilles in the hall, Achilles' door was already shut.

—

Zagreus went back to his cabin. Showered. Fidgeted constantly, like a twitching little creature trying to break free of a crushing weight.

He didn't bother dressing before getting on the bed. "Kleos, what are the chances you'd be interested in sex again?" he asked, looking at the soft blue glow coming from the alcove shelf where Kleos sat when Zag showered. "With me," he clarified, and then, because he didn't need to clarify, he said, "obviously."

"*Soothing the sting a little, lad?*" Kleos teased.

"Don't." Zagreus sat on the bed. "I can't. Just don't."

"*I'm sorry.*" The apology sounded so genuine Zagreus was almost guilty for eliciting it. "*Do you... would it help to discuss what happened with Achilles before you involve yourself with me?*"

"I would really prefer not to relive that," Zagreus said. "We don't have to—it doesn't have to be sex." He felt like he was truly whining now, and he flopped onto his back, dragging his hand through his hair, which was mussed from his shower. "Can you just talk to me?"

"*Zagreus,*" he said, and even Zag's name, said in that slow, rumbling roll, started to dull the edge. "*I truly do think one would have to be crazy to*

completely reject you, extenuating circumstances aside."

"I must know a lot of crazy people, then," Zagreus replied. "Sorry, that's probably uncharitable to everyone I've ever been involved with. But... truly all I have ever received is rejection." He felt his own voice come out harsh, but it had to be that way, or he'd cry. He was getting chilly. He tugged his blanket over his lap.

"My dear heart," Kleos called him. "Pick me up, I can't feel you."

He hadn't set Kleos on his chest, breaking the nightly routine they'd fallen into. He was too near tears and didn't want Kleos to feel the shaky anguish of his breath. But he couldn't deny Kleos' request, and he did as told, placing Kleos in his customary spot, tracing the now-familiar patterns of the leaves embossed on his face.

"There's an odd thing about not having any memory of my mortal days: I seldom want to return to them," Kleos said. "But oh, I wish I could hold you."

"Thanks," Zagreus said, his voice watery again.

"I do not know how it is that you lived in Tartarus your entire life and yet you retain a heart that is not guarded, a love that is not cold."

Zagreus couldn't bring a reply to his lips. He made a disgustingly pitiful little noise.

"Achilles," Kleos said, "is a fool."

"I don't think *that*, Kleos, it's his prerogative to love who he wants," Zag said.

"I'll not hear you defend his foolishness. Were I in his place I would have kissed you."

"Kleooooos," Zagreus laughed, wiping the heel of his hand against his cheek. "He had a perfectly good reason for not kissing me. I ought to be content with it. I just... I'm not usually this upset—it wasn't this bad with Meg. Or

Than. Well, maybe it was this bad with Than." He definitely remembered laying on his bed and crying that one through.

"Zagreus," Kleos said, his voice purposefully gentle. "You can allow yourself to be upset that a man you admire doesn't see you the same way."

"I know."

His heart was still trying to close its doors. He had other things to worry about: making his way to Olympus, finding his mother, keeping Kleos safe. He couldn't afford to become distracted by his feelings for a man.

"Also, you can allow yourself to think he is a fool for not kissing you."

"Alright, if you're going to keep insisting I'm so kissable, I will admit he's a fool." Zagreus held Kleos in his cupped hands, smoothing his thumbs along the rim of the disc. The bronze of his casing was starting to turn brighter where Zag frequently touched him. Kleos couldn't feel it, but there was evidence that Zagreus had held him.

"I insist."

Zagreus lifted Kleos, pressing a little kiss to the center of the embossed laurels.

"Thank you," Kleos said.

Zagreus, having not realized Kleos would notice such a thing, almost dropped him. "How did you—!?"

"I can hear you. I don't mind it, sweetheart. I only wish I could return your affection."

"Oh." Zagreus swore Kleos would be able to feel him heating with an embarrassed flush. "Well, as long as you don't mind."

"I do not," said Kleos.

Zagreus wasn't entirely certain what he would have said next, probably something along the lines of an apology for his dramatics or a request that Kleos forget about his proposition in the wake of another man's rejection.

He never got a chance.

The ship rocked, not the ordinary, gentle motion of spaceflight, but a hard jolt, like it had been struck. It was enough force to knock Zagreus straight out of bed, sending him sprawling to the floor with one hand cupped around Kleos, his other bracing himself against another sickening lurch.

"What's going on?" Kleos asked, having felt the fall.

"I don't know," Zagreus said. "But I don't think I want to be stark naked right now."

9. Chapter 9

Summary for the Chapter:

The Bullhorn travels through an especially dangerous area of space known as the Cerberus Belt.

Notes for the Chapter:

It's action sequence time! which means this was. real fuckin hard to write. but I like how it ended up!

Zagreus dressed, yanking on his leggings, an undershirt, and his coat, popping Kleos into his pocket. He pulled on his boots before going to the door, staggering again because the ship was now tilting the *other* direction. The *Bullhorn* continued to sway as Zagreus threw the door open, meeting Achilles, who was already racing out of his own cabin.

"Achilles! What's happening?"

"What's *happening*," Achilles said through gritted teeth, stalking down the hall, "is that our damned captain doesn't know how to navigate properly and we've hit the Cerberus belt at the exact wrong time. *Again*."

The ship tilted, and Zagreus was flattened against the wall. Suddenly, Achilles' note of, '*work will only become consuming once they break things*' gained context.

"Come on, lad, we should get you somewhere safe," Achilles said, extending his robotic hand. "It's more reinforced near the center of the ship —"

"Let me help," Zagreus said, although he took Achilles' hand if only to steady himself. "I can help, just point me in the right direction."

"Right, then—" Achilles seemed to have something more to say, but he was cut off by ominous creaking. "Right."

He pulled Zagreus along, out of his door and down the hall. Once they got out of Engineering, they could see chaos erupting, the crew of the *Bullhorn* rushing to stations. There was a low boom as the cannons lining the sides of the ship fired on the asteroids, turning enormous chunks of rock into smaller, less deadly projectiles.

Achilles stopped a crew member who was tying down everything that wasn't already bolted to the floor. "How's shielding?" he asked. "Are the sails down yet?"

"We lost shielding on the prow, but everywhere else is fine," she answered. "As for the sails, I don't know."

Achilles rolled his eyes upward as if he was praying to the divine for a moment. "Alright. Up we go, then, lad." He gestured for Zagreus to follow.

Zagreus was having trouble keeping his feet as the ship pitched, and nearly tumbled back down the stairs, but he held tight to the railing and made his way to the top deck, where the danger bordered on apocalyptic.

They looked like they were in the center of a Tartarus hailstorm, except instead of ice, they were being pelted with chunks of rock. Most of the projectiles plinked against the ship's shields and fell, but they generated enough force to roll the ship back and forth, as any attempt to dampen inertia failed.

Theseus was at the helm, looking as ruffled as Zagreus had ever seen them, his hair askew, his face red. He was yelling, because when was he not? Asterius had the wheel, using his great strength to push back against the force of the asteroid shower they were fighting through.

Did they do this *every time*? No wonder no ships from Elysium rarely traveled to Olympus.

"Why are the sails still up!?" Achilles shouted at Theseus. "Those should have been down first!"

"The automatic pulleys failed!" Theseus replied. "If we want them down, we have to go up there and pull."

"Then get everyone up there who can!" Achilles turned, jumping onto the rail of the ship, his boot in the rigging, the blade of his prosthetic leg swinging free. "Lad, can you climb the other side? We'll need us both."

Zagreus only nodded, racing to the other side of the deck, dodging loose barrels that were rolling from one side of the deck to another. The reinforced steel would keep them from bursting and spilling all their contents. Probably. He made for the rigging.

Higher and higher, Zagreus tried to match pace with Achilles, who climbed quickly despite only using one leg. "I don't know what I'm doing," Zag muttered, mostly for himself but also for Kleos.

"Do as he does," Kleos said. *"Just keep yourself safe."*

The further up the mast they got, the more terrifying it became to turn around and see an asteroid careening toward him. They all bounced off the shield, but an invisible forcefield felt like no protection at all when Zagreus was at the top of the rigging, finding the pulley for the sails which was supposed to be automatic.

He grabbed the ropes, and pulled as hard as he could, the loose sails fighting him all the way and the ropes biting into his palms. More sailors had climbed the rigging to take the lower sails, so Zagreus was only responsible for the top, but he had to match his force to Achilles, who was pulling with his robotic arm. It took all Zagreus' strength to keep up, slowly inching the sail closed. When it was complete, he locked the pulley and turned to see yet another piece of flying space debris coming toward him.

He was glad he still retained the instinct to duck, because the shields were failing. This one passed through.

It sailed over Zagreus' head and crashed into the mast, leaving a sizable dent. It would have torn through the sail if Zag hadn't tied it down. Achilles was yelling at him. Zag couldn't hear, but his lips read *'GET DOWN.'*

There were more loose rocks flying at him on his way down, zipping past his face and cutting into his cheeks, thumping into his shoulders and his back, slicing his leggings. The shield had only failed at the topmost portion of the mast, but Zagreus couldn't climb very fast, especially with chunks of rock bombarding him.

He supposed he could jump.

He let go of the rigging and dropped, letting the ship's artificial gravity pull him downward.

He would have hit the deck hard, but he activated his boots just before he landed, rocketing him to only a slightly painful thump against the deck and an ungraceful landing. The ship was steadying now that it didn't have to compensate for the warping of the shield around the sails, but Zagreus lay there a moment longer, just trying to breathe.

"Kleos," he whispered, before things calmed enough that someone could overhear him. "Are you okay?"

"I believe I have suffered a minor dent. I am fine."

"Zagreus!" There were footsteps running across the deck.

There was also shouting from the helm. "I want a full inventory of the lower decks! Tend to your assistant *later*, are the engines going to get us through the rest of this?"

Zagreus sat up just in time to see Achilles turning and glaring at the helm. "I reinforced the engines after the last time you did this!" He dropped to a knee beside Zagreus. "I will make certain my *crew* is alright before I check on something I already know is fine. If you please. *Captain.*"

"M fine, sir, you really don't have to—I just tend to land badly with these boots."

"You're torn to shreds, lad, let me help you up. Lean on me, alright?"

Theseus was not assuaged. "You overstep your place, Pelides!" He stepped down from the helm and marched to them, leaving Asterius to navigate the rest of the Cerberus belt, which was starting to lighten up. Zagreus knew there were three major clusters of asteroids, and it seemed they had flown right into the edge of one.

"I am doing nothing of the sort," said Achilles.

Theseus continued to bluster. "You are beneath me in every way! Now go down and check the engines. Else I will leave you when we next come into port."

Zagreus tugged on Achilles' sleeve. "Achilles, really, I'll come with you. We'll check the engines, he's not worth it," Zagreus said. Were it his ass on the line, he'd be shouting right back at Theseus, but Achilles was a skilled member of this crew who deserved more respect than he received, and certainly didn't deserve punishment for wanting to watch over Zagreus.

"*He* might not be worth it," Achilles said quietly, as he helped Zagreus back below deck (Zagreus wasn't truly limping but the ship was still not completely steady). "*You* are worth it."

"Thanks." Zagreus hated how affectionate flutters took flight in his chest when Achilles said that, not hours after turning him down. "Engines first, sir, then I promise I'll go look after myself."

— — —

The engines were fine.

Zagreus' bedroom was not.

Zag's room had been hit by the worst of it, making him very glad he'd not been in there during. The wall behind the bed was completely busted in—no holes, but the shelves crushed and the bed itself warped beyond repair. Zag didn't want to know the state of the bathroom. That was a question which couldn't be answered anyway, because the space between the bed and

the bathroom door had been crumpled by the blast and it would take somebody much smaller than Zag to get past it.

"I'm sorry, lad, your walls aren't quite as reinforced as the engine room's, I'm afraid," Achilles said. "Nothing important was broken, I hope?"

His bag had been dumped onto the floor and spilled all manner of things, but nothing in there was too terribly delicate. He clapped a hand to his breast pocket, thanking the gods he hadn't left Kleos down here.

"Doesn't seem it," Zagreus sighed. He crouched, scooping things back into his bag.

"Come into my room, let me take a look at your injuries," Achilles said.

"Oh, it's fine, sir, I can tend to them myself." He had bandages in his bag somewhere. Which now meant he had bandages scattered somewhere on the floor of what had once been a bedroom.

"You need to wash out those scrapes," Achilles said. "And you certainly can't access your sink. Come on, don't be stubborn."

Zagreus, who really did want to be stubborn but was far too tired, agreed.

He'd never seen the interior of Achilles' room before. The bright overhead light was switched off in favor of bulbs of various sizes which hung from the ceiling, and all the walls were draped in embroidered, patterned cloth. It had the result of turning the place into a rather cozy nest, which was not something Zagreus expected of somebody as outwardly pragmatic as Achilles. It was the same size as Zagreus' room but the bed had been removed and traded out for a mattress on the floor, which covered the whole of the room and meant the bed was almost twice as big as Zag's narrow cot. It was overflowing with several colorful pillows and blankets of all sizes, which were all strewn about thanks to the unsteady ride. Really, the only ways in which it resembled Zagreus' room were the built-in shelving and the sliding bathroom door.

Achilles went into the bathroom and came back with a cloth he'd soaked in the sink, and he indicated for Zagreus to sit down.

He started with the scrapes on Zagreus' hands, which was as good as any place to start, passing the cloth over them until there was no more dirt to irritate them. "I'm sorry you had to be with us through a mess like that, lad. And especially coming on the heels of me making things so uncomfortable!"

"You didn't—if anything, *I* was the one who made things awkward."

"Still. I was hoping this would be a good run, but that's too much to ask. Theseus couldn't pilot a ship out of a tin can, much less the Cerberus belt. Can't believe they still let him—nepotism at its finest."

Zagreus laughed, but it turned into a hiss as Achilles examined the rope burn on his palms.

"I'm sorry, lad, I'll be more gentle," he said, passing the cloth over them with less pressure.

"No, I'm fine."

Zagreus watched Achilles' bowed head as he tended to him, the little golden glimmers caught in his lashes. And then, in order to expressly stop watching that, he turned his head and asked, "is your android project okay?" It certainly seemed like the most delicate thing in Engineering.

"Oh, he's fine," Achilles said. "Except for the parts that already weren't working, which can't be blamed on Theseus' deplorable piloting."

"To be honest, you sounded like more of a captain than he did back there," Zagreus said. If Achilles hadn't started giving orders, they never would have escaped so smoothly. The ship was still rocking a little more than was comfortable, but it wasn't the mess they would have been in with torn sails or a broken shield generator.

"It's kind of you to say, but I'm not much of a captain anymore," Achilles said. He'd retrieved a first aid kit from the bathroom as well, and was peeling off strips of adhesive bandage to fasten them over Zagreus' wounds.

"Were you a captain?"

"I was a lot of things," Achilles said.

"He asked if one of them was a captain," said Kleos, although Achilles couldn't hear him. Zagreus didn't repeat Kleos' question.

"How much do you know about the Trojan War?" Achilles asked, moving to the cuts on his face.

"Not a lot," Zagreus admitted, talking quietly so his face didn't move too much. "I know it ended some ten or fifteen years ago, and it left a lot of people in bad places. I know it stopped because of a godly decree."

"Right," Achilles said. "Well, sometimes, a 'bad place' is aboard the *Bullhorn*. I told you I lost someone I love. That happened because of the war." He put a bandage on Zagreus' cheek, leaving his skin tingling where he'd touched him. "Near the end of it. Sometimes I think... if things had only ended a little earlier, he might have lived."

"I'm sorry, Achilles," Zagreus said. "You don't have to talk about this if it's painful."

"No." Achilles said, shaking his head. "You should know. After he died, I wasn't the same. I did such terrible things, lad... nobody I knew then can look at me in the same way. And they shouldn't. I became a monster." He pulled back, put his hands in his lap. "That's why I entered this career. Far enough from people, and I'm building something instead of destroying things. And I can search for him."

"For your love? Did he die—is he a shade, then?" Perhaps like the chef on the ship, loaned out by Tartarus to work on some Olympian vessel.

Achilles nodded. "I think so. It's difficult to explain." He gestured at the cut on Zagreus' thigh. "You're going to have to undress if you want me to help with that one."

"Oh! No, no—that's fine. I'll get it myself. I mean—I'm not wearing anything under these." He plucked at his leggings. "Just leave me alone a moment and I'll tend to it."

Achilles looked away abruptly and cleared his throat. "Right," he said, standing and heading for the door. "You take my room tonight, lad. I need to see to the damage."

Zagreus swore Achilles' face ears were pink.

— — —

Zagreus wasn't certain whether Achilles was trying to avoid him the next morning, or if he was simply putting himself on an opposite sleep schedule so they wouldn't have to share a bed. When Zagreus got up, Achilles went to bed, leaving Zag to wander the decks wondering what he was supposed to do with himself while Achilles wasn't around to keep an eye on him. If he went anywhere near Theseus, he'd probably get yelled at.

He spent time helping put things back together in the lower decks. Righting cargo, repairing bunks, simple tasks. It let his mind wander—he thought of Achilles and his heartache, of Kleos and when Zagreus would next be able to have a private conversation with him, without his own room. He thought of how this ship would be better served with Achilles at the helm.

Once most everything had been taken care of, Zagreus returned to Engineering. He didn't want to wake Achilles, who had been up all night and dearly needed rest, but he was at a loss for what to do next.

He ended up sitting cross-legged before the prone form of Achilles' android. He'd already described it to Kleos, but he informed Kleos of the changes—mostly, that the android seemed to have even *more* wires coming out of its chest. It was like a bloodstain so extensive you couldn't tell where the wound was.

"I wonder if this poor fellow has a name," Kleos said.

"Achilles calls it 'him'. Maybe he named it," Zagreus agreed.

"What do you think he ought to be called?"

"He doesn't look like much of anything, it's hard to tell. No face, and all that."

"I have no face."

"Yes, but you have a personality to make up for it." Come to think of it...

"This metal is actually a similar bronze to you. I think it used to be armor—maybe you used to be someone's set of armor. It makes your name make sense." It meant *'Glory'*.

"Explains why I survived you dropping off a mast and flattening me."

"You're already flat," Zagreus said. "And I'm sorry about the dent." He had his hand in his pocket, and he was rubbing the dent on Kleos as if he could smooth it out like a wrinkled shirt. It was a little mark, one of his rims flattened slightly for a span no longer than Zag's fingertip.

"I can't actually see or feel it, so I don't think I mind too terribly."

"Good, then." Zagreus got to his feet. "Alright. We're going to go get some food, bring some for Achilles, and then we're going to bed."

Whether Achilles was in there or not.

— — —

Achilles was not in there—he was up by the time Zagreus got back from the kitchens. He gratefully accepted the meal, even though it was dinner and Achilles had just woken and would probably be wanting breakfast.

It was oddly lonely working opposite schedules to Achilles. Zagreus wanted to spend time with him, wanted Achilles to continue teaching him, but he

was too exhausted to do anything more than slump off to bed while Achilles worked.

Last night, he hadn't been so distracted by the way Achilles' bed smelled.

It wasn't like what Zagreus caught when he stood close to Achilles, it was something about Achilles himself. Rich, almost spicy, catching in the roof of his mouth. He wanted to press his face into the pillows.

Instead, he had brought his own pillow over from his squashed bedroom (which Achilles assured him would be fixed after the ship was next repaired at port, with a remark that almost no part of this ship was original, with how often Theseus damaged it). Achilles' bed was comfortable enough to send Zagreus to sleep even when he was distracted by his feelings for Achilles himself.

He settled Kleos in his usual spot, and let himself drift.

— — —

When Zagreus woke, Achilles was standing over him. For a second, Zagreus thought Achilles was looking at *him*, but he was actually looking at Zagreus's chest—rather, what was sitting there.

"Is that what I think it is, lad?"

Zagreus sat up, which caused Kleos to slide off him. He caught him in both hands, flipping him over so his laurels were upright. "Uh... depends on what you think it is?"

"*Is what what he thinks it is?*" said Kleos, who didn't realize he was the topic of conversation.

Zagreus, figuring this was all going to come out anyway, bounced Kleos in his hand a little to indicate that he was talking to him. "You," he said. Whether Achilles interpreted that as Zagreus talking to Kleos or to him, he wasn't sure.

"I'm sorry, Zagreus, it's just, I think..." He swallowed, his eyes wide, and dropped to his knees, looking at Kleos sitting innocuously in Zag's hands. "I think that's my husband."

Author's Note:

Find me on Twitter [@luddlestons](#) or on my NSFW twitter [@luddlessmut](#)